"Howard's writing seems so highly charged with energy that it nearly gives off sparks."
–STEPHEN KING

ROBERT E. HOWARD

CREATOR OF CONAN®

BRAN MAK MORN

THE LAST KING

FEATURING A NEWLY DISCOVERED, NEVER-BEFORE-PUBLISHED STORY!

FULLY ILLUSTRATED BY GARY GIANNI

Bran Mak MornRobert E. HowardDelReyOEB2005-04-28Fiction0345484614en

Contents

Cover Page

Title Page

Dedication

Foreword

Introduction

Men of the Shadows

Kings of the Night

A Song of the Race

Worms of the Earth

The Dark Man

The Lost Race

Poem

Miscellanea

Notes on Miscellanea

The Little People

The Little People -Typescript

The Children of the Night

Bran Mak Morn

Bran Mak Morn - Manuscript

Synopsis

Worms of the Earth -Draft Version

Fragment

Poem—Previously Unpublished

Untitled

Endnotes

Appendices

Robert E. Howard and the Picts: A Chronology

Robert E. Howard, Bran Mak Morn and the Picts

Notes on the Original Howard Texts

Acknowledgments

Also by Robert E. Howard

Praise for Robert E. Howard

Copyright

For Julie, Nicole and Gina

—Gary Gianni

Men of the Shadows

first published *Bran Mak Morn*, Dell 1969

Verse in *Men of the Shadows*

first published *Always Comes Evening*, Arkham House 1957

Kings of the Night

first published *Weird Tales*, November 1930

A Song of the Race

first published *Bran Mak Morn*, Dell 1969

Worms of the Earth

first published *Weird Tales*, November 1932

The Dark Man

first published *Weird Tales*, December 1931

The Lost Race

first published *Weird Tales*, December 1927

Poem
originally published as *The Drums of Pictdom*

Bran Mak Morn, Dell 1969

The Little People

first published *Coven 13*, January 1970

The Little People – Typescript

appears here for the first time

The Children of the Night

first published *Weird Tales*, April–May 1931

Bran Mak Morn
originally published as *Bran Mak Morn: A Play*

Bran Mak Morn: A Play, and Others, Cryptic Publications 1983

Bran Mak Morn – Manuscript

appears here for the first time

Synopsis
originally published as *Bran Mak Morn Synopsis*

Cromlech No. 3, 1988

Worms of the Earth – Draft Version

appears here for the first time

Fragment

first published *Bran Mak Morn*, Dell 1969

Poem

appears here for the first time

Untitled

appears here for the first time

Foreword

I had been working on illustrating Bran Mak Morn for a couple of months when a friend of mine made the following remark: “What is there to draw?” he asked. “Those stories rely heavily upon mood and things half-seen in the shadows.”

I mulled over his observation for a long time without a reply. After almost two years, I think I have an answer.

I agree there are a lot of shadowy half-seen things in the Bran stories and I’ve tried to remain true to the author’s intent by keeping them so. On the other hand, there is a singular quality crying out for embellishment (at least in my

view), a quality which sets these stories apart from the rest of Howard's work.

It's the quality of pathos.

Compassion is an element generally not associated with Howard. Here he transcends the fantasy and the heroics he's known for by creating genuine sympathy for his noble Picts, the dark men who overcome all obstacles by their courage but are finally themselves overcome by fate. It's this attribute I'm chiefly attracted to and I hope in some way my pictures reflect that.

I will try to leave Robert E. Howard's shadowy figures to your imagination. Perhaps after reading *Bran Mak Morn – The Last King* you'll want to sketch those things yourself.

Gary Gianni
2001

Introduction

Robert E. Howard (1906–1936), in a writing career that spanned less than a dozen years, created many memorable fantasy adventure characters, such as Conan, Kull, and Solomon Kane, who continue to thrill readers long after they first appeared in the legendary magazine, *Weird Tales*. The seemingly endlessly inventive author also created enormously popular characters in other genres, such as the western tall-tales of Breckenridge Elkins, the rollicking misadventures of Sailor Steve Costigan, and the Middle Eastern exploits of El Borak and Kirby O'Donnell. But of all the many characters he created, none seem to have held for the Texas author a fascination to equal that of the people he called Picts, and their great king, Bran Mak Morn.

Writers for the pulp magazines often found that a single character who became popular with readers could turn into a significant meal ticket (Tarzan, for example, or Doc Savage). Unlike many of his contemporaries, though, Howard found that, no matter how popular his characters might be with the readers, he could not continue a series indefinitely. He told fellow *Weird Tales* author Clark Ashton Smith, regarding his most famous creation, Conan, "the time will come when I will suddenly find myself unable to write convincingly of him at all. This has happened in the past with nearly all my numerous characters; suddenly I would find myself out of contact with the conception, as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character."

Most of his tales of Kull, the Atlantean adventurer who becomes king of a fabled land, were written between 1927 and 1929. When H.P. Lovecraft, in 1934, suggested that Howard write more, the Texan replied, “To sit down and consciously try to write another story on that order would be to produce something the artificiality of which would be apparent.” The Solomon Kane stories were written between 1927 and 1930, the Conan tales between 1932 and 1935. Despite the popularity of these characters – *Weird Tales* readers were still asking for more Kull and Kane stories four and five years after the last had appeared – Howard simply could not bring himself to write more stories after he had lost touch with the conception.

The Picts, though, appeared in some of Howard’s earliest, hand-written manuscripts, dating from perhaps 1923, and in one of the last-written Conan stories, in 1935, and rarely a year went by that they did not figure in some Howard tale.

“There is one hobby of mine which puzzles me to this day,” Howard wrote to Lovecraft in 1932. “That is my interest in the people which, for the sake of brevity, I have always designated as Picts. I am of course aware that my use of the term might be questioned. . . . But to me ‘Pict’ must always refer to the small dark Mediterranean aborigines of Britain. This is not strange, since when I first read of these aborigines, they were referred to as Picts. But what is strange, is my unflagging interest in them.”

The reasons for Howard’s fascination with the Picts are undoubtedly as complex as the man himself, and represent a potentially fertile field for generations of scholars and critics. Whatever these reasons might be, the fact remains that the Picts appeared in stories throughout his career, even while better-known or more popular characters played only briefly across the stage of his imagination. Certainly this must be attributed, at least in part, to some strong sense of identification Howard must have felt with this people. But his conception of the Picts also stretches across a vast canvas, from the remotest recesses of a mythical prehistory to the modern era, and though they are based upon a historical people, the conception is “mixed with a bit of fantasy,” so they could be made to serve in stories set not only in the historical past, but in the purely imaginary prehistory of Kull and Conan, and even in more modern tales based on the so-called ‘Cthulhu mythos.’

Howard’s first published story of the Picts (and his second story accepted for professional publication), *The Lost Race*, is set in the historical past, a period when the Britons have only recently displaced the earlier Gaels from the south of what is now England. The Picts here are the remnants of the pre-

Celtic inhabitants of the Isles, a race that had migrated from the Mediterranean region during the Stone Age. In relating his race's history, the ancient Pict seems to suggest that they originated in Africa. This view of the race's origins is consistent with prevailing historical opinion in Howard's time (though then, as now, the term 'Pict' was not generally applied to these Mediterraneans), as is the idea that they were driven 'underground' (to caverns, or to dwellings called 'crannogs' built on lakes), and that from them derived legends of 'little people.'

Howard's second complete tale of the Picts, though, is another matter. *Men of the Shadows* was turned down by *Weird Tales* in 1926, about a year after *The Lost Race* was accepted by the same magazine. Editor Farnsworth Wright complained that "It is too little of a 'story.' . . . It is rather a chronicle of a tribe, a picture of the evolution of a race." The criticism seems just, but for those seeking to understand Howard's conceptions of the Picts, it is a very important tale. In this story, as in *The Lost Race*, we find the history of the Picts related by an ancient member of the tribe (in this case an unnamed wizard), but now it extends much farther into antiquity, beyond the bounds of what we consider 'history.' Here we find our earliest example of what will become a Howard trademark: the idea of a vastly ancient, cyclic history of mankind, in which whole peoples undertake long migrations, surviving world-shattering cataclysms that destroy their hard-won cultures and hurl them back into savagery, whence they slowly, steadily make the upward climb until the next cataclysm.

Men of the Shadows is also the first completed story of Bran Mak Morn, though we know of at least two earlier attempts to commit him to paper. Here, as in the earliest extant work in which Bran appears (the unfinished play, *Bran Mak Morn*), we find him bound to his people by a sense of mission, the feeling that he must single-handedly lift them out of savagery. And even in these very early works, we find the sense of doom hanging over Bran's story. "Suppose I do drag them a little way toward the goal? I will fall in battle and they will back deeper than ever into the pit of barbarism." Author David Weber has suggested that this is one of the characteristics that makes the Bran stories stand out from Howard's other heroic tales: "The brooding darkness which clings to virtually all of Howard's heroic fantasy is nowhere stronger than in the case of Bran Mak Morn, last king of the oldest race – an alien among his own degenerating people, set apart by a pure bloodline they no longer share, who knows his entire race is going down into the dark no matter what he does. Yet for all his awareness of the inevitability of the Picts' doom, Bran refuses simply to submit to it. . . . I think it's the fact that Bran Mak Morn, more than any of Howard's other characters, sees the doom awaiting

him so clearly which makes Bran the quintessential Howard hero, for all of Howard's heroes share that refusal to surrender, yet few of the others are brought as inescapably face-to-face with the ultimate futility of their struggle."

In *Men of the Shadows*, Bran is identified only as a 'chief,' not a king. At the time this story was written, the theme of kingship had not yet emerged in Howard's work. When it did, though, in the Kull stories, the Picts were there, but Bran was not. The Picts and Atlanteans, in these tales, both inhabit island chains to the west of Kull's kingdom of Valusia, and are ancient foes, but Kull's best friend and ally comes to be Brule the Spear-Slayer, a Pict. Brule, whose name echoes Berula, of *The Lost Race*, appears in nearly all the stories in the Kull series, written, as noted before, largely between 1927 and 1929.

The next significant appearances of the Picts in Howard's work brought them back into the historical world, though in somewhat different eras. *Kings of the Night*, the Howard masterwork that features both Bran Mak Morn and Kull, seems to be set in roughly the same period actually specified by Howard in a synopsis for a never-written Bran story: 'between 296 and 300 A.D.' (Lest we too hastily assume this to solidly place Bran in history for us, on a separate listing of his stories and characters Howard had given Bran's era as 100 A.D.) *The Dark Man*, which was accepted for publication at the same time as *Kings of the Night* (March 1930), is set in the early 11th century. In the former tale, Bran is the son of a chief who has, by his own efforts, united many of the Pictish clans into something that might become a nation. In the latter story, Bran has become a god to the remnants of the Picts, surviving on the outer fringes of the British Isles. In both tales, Howard decisively links Bran to the age of Kull, telling us that he is the direct descendant of Brule the Spear-Slayer, and in these stories he first identifies Bran as 'king' of the Picts, rather than a 'chief.' *The Dark Man* also provides a glimpse of Bran's eventual fate, and that of his people, and it is exactly that foretold in the earlier tales: "Bran Mak Morn fell in battle; the nation fell apart. Like wolves we Picts live now among the scattered islands, among the crags of the highlands and the dim hills of Galloway. We are a fading people. We pass." (It may be worth noting that *Night of the Wolf*, a tale of the 5th century reiver Cormac Mac Art, written in the spring of 1930, also showcased the Picts, though Bran was not mentioned.)

Later in 1930, Howard began corresponding with H.P. Lovecraft, the highly esteemed weird fictionist, who encouraged the Texan to join with him and Clark Ashton Smith in inserting glancing references to one another's fictional creations in their own work, thus lending all an aura of verisimilitude.

Howard's own additions to the 'Cthulhu mythos' include the forbidden tome, *Unaussprechlichen Kulten (Nameless Cults)* and its author Von Junzt, the mad poet Justin Geoffrey, the Black Stone, the serpent men from the Kull stories – and the Picts and their great king/god, Bran Mak Morn. In his first attempt at a Lovecraft-type story, *The Children of the Night*, Howard refers to 'the Bran cult,' the remnants of the Pictish race who, even in the present day, worship The Dark Man, the stone effigy of their great king. Further inspired by Lovecraft's letters, he also decisively turned from an earlier theory about the fate of the Picts. In *The Little People*, written about 1928, he had linked the Picts with the loathsome subterranean dwellers of Arthur Machen's *The Shining Pyramid*, suggesting that, having been driven into caves (as in *The Lost Race*), they had degenerated into these hideous creatures. In *The Children of the Night*, though, these subterranean creatures are said to have degenerated from a Mongolian race which Lovecraft told him were displaced when the Neolithic peoples first began to spread through Europe and into the British Isles, and we learn that the Picts detest them as much as the Celts do.

This idea served as the genesis of what most fans regard as Howard's finest story of Bran Mak Morn and the Picts (and one of his very best, period), the tale of which Lovecraft wrote, "Few readers will ever forget the hideous and compelling power of that macabre masterpiece, *Worms of the Earth*." Here Bran, to slake his thirst for vengeance against the Roman governor who has ordered a Pict crucified, makes an unholy pact with the loathsome underground dwellers. Lovecraft noted that one of the things that made Howard's stories so vivid was that "he himself is in every one of them," and Howard himself recognized it with this story. Noting that all his previous tales of Bran and the Picts had been told through non-Pictish narrators, he said, "Only in my last Bran story, *The Worms of the Earth* ... did I look through Pictish eyes, and speak with a Pictish tongue!"

The comment was, alas, prophetic: *Worms of the Earth* turned out to be the last story of Bran Mak Morn Howard would write, though not the last of the Picts. In a letter dated March 10, 1932, *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright wrote: "I want to schedule *Worms of the Earth* soon, for that is an unusually fine story, I think." In that same letter, he rejects one story outright and sends another back for revisions: they are *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* and *The Phoenix on the Sword*, the first tales of Conan the Cimmerian, who would keep Howard busy chronicling his adventures for the next three years. The Picts, of course, inhabit Conan's Hyborian Age, which lies in the mythical past between the pre-Cataclysmic Age of Kull and our own historical epoch. As always, they are on the fringes of that world, savage inhabitants of the primeval forests of the west, age-old foes of Conan's people (who are

descendants of the Atlanteans), bitterly contesting any attempt to enter their domains. The Picts play a central role in one of Howard's last, and best, Conan tales, *Beyond the Black River*, in which he played out in fiction the struggle that had taken place on the American frontiers, including his native Texas. Tellingly, the Picts in that story take back land that was taken from them, scoring a temporary success against the Aquilonians, just as Bran had warded off the incursions of the Romans in Caledonia.

In *The Hyborian Age*, an essay in which Howard outlined a pseudo-history for Conan's world, linking it with the age of Kull and our own dim prehistory, he tells us that, about five hundred years after Conan's time, the Hyborian kingdoms were overthrown by the growth of a vast Pictish empire, the handiwork of a great chieftain named Gorm. But, Howard noted, "Conquest and the acquiring of wealth altered not the Pict; out of the ruins of the crushed civilization no new culture arose phoenix-like. The dark hands which shattered the artistic glories of the conquered never tried to copy them. Though he sat among the glittering ruins of shattered palaces and clad his hard body in the silks of vanquished kings, the Pict remained the eternal barbarian, ferocious, elemental, interested only in the naked primal principles of life, unchanging, unerring in his instincts which were all for war and plunder, and in which arts and the cultured progress of humanity had no place."

Throughout his writing career, from the pre-Cataclysmic exploits of Brule the Spear-Slayer, through the Hyborian Age of Conan and the primordial eras of *Marchers of Valhalla* and *The Valley of the Worm*, through the historical world of Bran Mak Morn and even surviving into our own day, the Picts play a central role in the work of Robert E. Howard. More than Conan, more than Kull, they represent for him the elemental, Eternal Barbarian.

Rusty Burke
2001

Men of the Shadows

Men of the Shadows

From the dim red dawn of Creation

From the fogs of timeless Time

Came we, the first great nation,
    First on the upward climb.

Savage, untaught, unknowing,
    Groping through primitive night,
Yet faintly catching the glowing,
    The hint of the coming Light.

Ranging o’er lands untraveled,
    Sailing o’er seas unknown
Mazed by world-puzzles unraveled,
    Building our land-marks of stone.

Vaguely grasping at glory,
    Gazing beyond our ken
Mutely the ages’ story
    Rearing on plain and fen.

See, how the Lost Fire smolders,
    We are one with the eons’ must.
Nations have trod our shoulders,
    Trampling us into the dust.

We, the first of the races,

Linking the Old and New –

Look, where the sea-cloud spaces

Mingle with ocean-blue.

So we have mingled with ages,

And the world-wind our ashes stirs,

Vanished are we from Time’s pages,

Our memory? Wind in the firs.

Stonehenge of long-gone glory

Sombre and lone in the night,

Murmur the age-old story

How we kindled the first of the Light.

Speak night-winds, of man’s creation,

Whisper o’er crag and fen,

The tale of the first great nation,

The last of the Stone Age men.

Sword met sword with clash and slither.

“Ailla! A-a-ailla!” rising on a steep pitch of sound from a hundred savage throats.

On all sides they swarmed upon us, a hundred to thirty. Back to back we stood, shields lapped, blades at guard. Those blades were red, but corselets and helmets, too, were red. One advantage we possessed, we were armored and our foes were not. Yet they flung themselves naked to the fray with as fierce a valor as if they were clad in steel.

Then for a moment they drew off and stood at a distance, gasping curses, blood from sword thrusts making strange patterns on their woad painted skins.

Thirty men! Thirty, the remnant of the troop of five hundred that had marched so arrogantly from Hadrian's Wall. Zeus, what a plan! Five hundred men, sent forth to hew a way through a land that swarmed with barbarians of another age. Marching over heather hills by day, hacking a crimson trail through blood-frenzied hordes, close camp at night, with snarling, gibbering beings that stole past the sentries to slay with silent dagger. Battle, bloodshed, carnage.

And word would go to the emperor in his fine palace, among his nobles and his women, that another expedition had disappeared among the hazy mountains of the mystic North.

I glanced at the men who were my comrades. There were Romans from Latinia and native-born Romans. There were Britons, Germans, and a flame-haired Hibernian. I looked at the wolves in human guise that ringed us round. Dwarfish, hairy men they were, bowed and gnarled of limb, long and mighty of arm, with great mops of coarse hair topping foreheads that slanted like apes'. Small unblinking black eyes glinted malevolent spite, like a snake's eyes. Scarce any clothing they wore, and they bore small round shields, long spears and short swords with oval shaped blades. While scarce one of them topped five feet in height, their incredibly broad shoulders denoted massive strength. And they were as quick as cats.

They came with a rush. Short savage sword clashed on short Roman sword. It was fighting at very close quarters, for the savages were better adapted to such battling and the Romans trained their soldiers in the use of the short blade. There the Roman shield was at disadvantage, for it was too heavy to be shifted swiftly and the savages crouched, thrusting upward.

Back to back we stood, and as a man fell, we closed the ranks again. On, on they pushed, until their snarling faces were close to ours, and their rank, beast-like breath was in our nostrils. Like men of steel we held the formation. The heather, the hills, time itself, faded. A man ceased to be a man and

became a mere fighting automaton. The haze of battle erased mind and soul. Swing, thrust. A blade shattering on shield; a bestial face snarling through the battle-fog. Smite! The face vanishing, for another face equally bestial.

Years of Roman culture slipped away like sea-fog before the sun. I was again a savage; a primal man of the forest and seas. A primal man, facing a tribe of another age, fierce in tribal hate, fierce with the slaughter-lust. How I cursed the shortness of the Roman sword I wielded. A spear crashed against my breast-plate; a sword shattered on my helmet crest, beating me to the ground. Up I reeled, slaying the smiter with a fierce up-slashing thrust. Then I stopped short, sword raised. Over all the heather was silence. No more foes stood before me. In a silent, gory band they lay, still grasping their swords, hacked and hewn faces still set in snarls of hate. And of the thirty that had faced them, there remained five. Two Romans, a Briton, the Irishman, and I. The Roman sword and the Roman armor had triumphed and incredible as it seemed, we had slain nearly four times our own number.

And there was but one thing we might do. Hew our way back over the trail we had come, seek to gain through countless leagues of ferocious land. On every hand great mountains reared. Snow crowned their summits and the land was not warm. How far north we were, we had no idea. The march was but a hazy memory into whose crimson fogs days and nights faded in a red panorama. All we knew was some days agone the remnants of the Roman army had been scattered among the peaks by a terrific tempest, on whose mighty wings the savages had assailed us by hordes. And the war horns had droned through the vales and crags for days, and the half-hundred of us who had held together had battled every step of the way, beset by yelling foemen who seemed to swarm from thin air. Now silence reigned and there was no sign of the tribesmen. South we headed, going like hunted things.

But before we set out, I found upon the battle-field that which thrilled me with a fierce joy. Grasped in the hand of a tribesman was a long, two handed sword. A Norse sword, by the hand of Thor! How the savages came by it, I know not. Possibly some yellow haired viking had gone down among them, battle-song on bearded lips, sword swinging. But at least the sword was there.

So fiercely had the savage clinched the hilt that I was forced to chop off his hand to gain the sword.

With it in my grasp, I felt bolder. Short swords and shields might suffice for men of middle height; but they were feeble arms for a warrior who towered more than five inches above six feet.

Over the mountains we went, clinging to narrow cliff edges, scaling steep crags. Like so many insects we crawled along the face of a sky-towering precipice, of such gigantic proportions that it seemed to dwarf men into mere nothingness. Up over its brow we climbed, nearly beaten down by the high mountain wind that roared with the voice of giants. And there we found they who waited for us. The Briton went down with a spear through him, reeled up, clutched him that wielded it, and over the cliff they tumbled together, to fall for a thousand feet. A wild, short flurry of fury, a whirl of swords and the battle was over. Four tribesmen lay still at our feet, and one of the Romans crouched, seeking to stem the blood that leaped from the stump of a severed arm.

Over the cliff we shoved those we had slain and we did up the Roman's arm with leather strips, binding them tight, so that the arm ceased to bleed. Then once more we took up our way.

On, on; crags reeled above us; gorse slopes tilted crazily. The sun towered above the swaying peaks and sloped westward. Then as we crouched upon a crag, hidden by great boulders, a band of tribesmen passed beneath, walking upon a narrow trail that skirted precipices and wound around mountain shoulders. And as they passed beneath us, the Irishman gave a shout of wild joy, and bounding from the cliff, fell among them. With yells like wolves they rushed upon him, and his red hair gleamed above their black. The first to reach him went down with a cleft head, and the second screeched as his arm left his shoulder. With a wild battle-yell, he drove his sword through a hairy breast, plucked it forth and smote off a head. Then they swarmed over him like wolves over a lion, and an instant later his head went up on a spear. The face still seemed to wear the battle-joy.

They passed on, never suspecting our presence, and again we pressed on. Night fell and the moon rose, making the peaks rear up like vague ghosts, throwing strange shadows among the valleys. As we went we found signs of the march, and of the retreat. There a Roman lying at the foot of a precipice, a smashed heap, perhaps a long spear through him; there a headless body, there a bodyless head. Shattered helmets, broken swords told the mute tale of fiercely contested battles.

On through the night we staggered, halting only at dawn, when we hid ourselves among the boulders and ventured forth again only when night had fallen. Groups of tribesmen passed close but we remained undiscovered, though at times we could have touched them as they went.

Dawn was breaking when we came upon a different land, a land that was merely a great plateau. Mountains towered on every hand, except to the south where the level land seemed to run for a long way. So I believed that we had left the mountains and had come upon the foot hills that stretched away to finally merge upon the fertile plains of the south.

So we came upon a lake and halted there. There was no sign of a foe, no smoke in the sky. But as we stood there, the Roman who had but one arm pitched forward on his face without a sound and there was a throwing spear through him.

We scanned the lake. No boats rippled its surface. No foe showed among the scant reeds near its bank. We turned, gazing across the heather. And without a sound the Roman crumpled and fell forward, a short spear standing between his shoulders.

Sword bared, and mazed, I searched the silent slopes for sign of a foe. The heath stretched bare from mountain to mountains and nowhere was the heather tall enough to hide a man, not even a Caledonian. No ripple stirred the lake – what caused that reed to sway when the others were motionless? I bent forward, peering into the water. Beside the reed a bubble rose to the surface. I bent nearer, wondering – a bestial face leered up at me, just below the surface of the lake! An instant's astoundment – then my frantic-swung sword split that hairy face, checking just in time the spear that leaped for my breast. The waters of the lake boiled in turmoil and presently there floated to the surface the form of the savage, the sheaf of throwing spears still in his belt, his ape-like hand still grasping the hollow reed through which he had breathed. Then I knew why so many Romans had been strangely slain by the shores of the lakes.

I flung away my shield, discarded all accoutrements except my sword, dagger and armor. A certain ferocious exultation thrilled me. I was one man, amid a savage land, amid a savage people who thirsted for my blood. By Thor and Woden, I would teach them how a Norseman passed! With each passing moment I became less of the cultured Roman. All dross of education and civilization slipped from me, leaving only the primitive man, only the primordial soul, red taloned, ferocious.

And a slow, deep rage began to rise in me, coupled with a vast Nordic contempt for my foes. I was in good mood to go berserk. Thor knows I had had fighting in plenty along the march and along the retreat, but the fighting soul of the Norse was a-stir in me, that has mystic depths deeper than the

North Sea. I was no Roman. I was a Norseman, a hairy chested, yellow bearded barbarian. And I strode the heath as arrogantly as if I trod the deck of my own galley. Picts, what were they? Stunted dwarfs whose day had passed. It was strange what a terrific hate began to consume me. And yet not so strange, for the further I receded in savagery, the more primitive my impulses became, and the fiercer flamed the intolerant hatred of the stranger, that first impulse of the primal tribesman. But there was a deeper, more sinister reason at the back of my mind, though I knew it not. For the Picts were men of another age, in very truth, the last of the Stone Age peoples, whom the Celts and Nordics had driven before them when they came down from the North. And somewhere in my mind lurked a nebulous memory of fierce, merciless warfare, waged in a darker age.

And there was a certain awe, too, not for their fighting qualities, but for the sorcery which all peoples firmly believed the Picts to possess. I had seen their cromlechs all over Britain, and I had seen the great rampart they had built not far from Corinium. I knew that the Celtic Druids hated them with a hate that was surprizing, even in priests. Not even the Druids could, or would tell just how the Stone Age men reared those immense barriers of stone, or for what reason, and the mind of the ordinary man fell back upon that explanation which has served for ages – witch-craft. More, the Picts themselves believed firmly that they were warlocks and perhaps that had something to do with it.

And I fell to wondering just why we five hundred men had been ordered out on that wild raid. Some had said to seize a certain Pictish priest, some that we sought word of the Pictish chief, one Bran Mak Morn. But none knew except the officer in command and his head rode a Pictish spear somewhere out in that sea of mountain and heather. I wished that I could meet that same Bran Mak Morn. ’Twas said that he was unmatched in warfare, either with army or singly. But never had we seen a warrior who seemed so much in command as to justify the idea that he was the chief. For the savages fought like wolves, though with a certain rude discipline.

Perhaps I might meet him and if he were as valiant as they said, he would surely face me.

I scorned concealment. Nay, more, I chanted a fierce song as I strode, beating time with my sword. Let the Picts come when they would. I was ready to die like a warrior.

I had covered many miles when I rounded a low hill and came full upon some hundred of them, fully armed. If they expected me to turn and flee, they were

far in error. I strode to meet them, never altering my gait, never altering my song. One of them charged to meet me, head down, point on and I met him with a down-smiting blow that cleft him from left shoulder to right hip. Another sprang in from the side, thrusting at my head, but I ducked so that the spear swished over my shoulder, and ripped out his guts as I straightened. Then they were surging all about me, and I cleared a space with one great two handed swing and set my back close to the steep hill side, close enough to prevent them from running behind me, but not too close for me to swing my blade. If I wasted motion and strength in the up and down movement, I more than made up by the smashing power of my sword-blows. No need to strike twice, on any foe. A swart bearded savage sprang in under my sword, crouching, stabbing upward. The sword blade turned on my corselet and I stretched him senseless with a downward smash of the hilt. They ringed me like wolves, striving to reach me with their shorter swords, and two went down with cleft heads as they tried to close with me. Then one, reaching over the shoulders of the others, drove a spear through my thigh and with a roar of fury I thrust savagely, spitting him like a rat. Before I could regain my balance, a sword gashed my right arm and another shattered upon my helmet. I staggered, swung wildly to clear a space and a spear tore through my right shoulder. I swayed, went to the ground and reeled up again. With a terrific swing of my shoulders I hurled my clawing, stabbing foes clear, and then, feeling my strength oozing from me with my blood, gave one lion-like roar and leaped among them, clean berserk. Into the press I hurled myself, smiting left and right, depending only on my armor to guard me from the leaping blades. That battle is a crimson memory. I was down, up, down again, up, right arm hanging, sword flailing in left hand. A man’s head spun from his shoulders, an arm vanished at the elbow, and then I crumpled to the ground striving vainly to lift the sword that hung in my loose grasp.

A dozen spears were at my breast in an instant, when someone threw the warriors back, and a voice spoke, as of a chief:

“Stay! This man must be spared.”

Vaguely as through a fog, I saw a lean, dark face as I reeled up to face the man who spoke.

Vaguely I saw a slim, dark haired man, whose head would come scarcely to my shoulder, but who seemed as lithe and strong as a leopard. He was scantily clad in plain close fitting garments, his only arm a long straight sword. He resembled in form and features the Picts no more than did I, and yet there was about him a certain apparent kinship to them.

All those things I noted vaguely, scarce able to keep my feet.

“I have seen you,” I said, speaking as one mazed. “Often and often in the forefront of battle I have seen you. Always you led the Picts to the charge while your chiefs slunk far from the field. Who are you?”

Then the warriors and the world and the sky faded and I crumpled to the heath.

Vaguely I heard the strange warrior say, “Stanch his wounds and give him food and drink.” I had learned their language from Picts who came to trade at the Wall.

I was aware that they did as the warrior bid them and presently I came to my senses, having drunk much of the wine that the Picts brew from heather. Then, spent, I lay upon the heather and slept nor recked of all the savages in the world.

When I awoke the moon was high in the sky. My arms were gone and my helmet, and several armed Picts stood guard over me. When they saw I was awake they motioned me to follow them, and set out across the heath. Presently we came to a high, bare hill and a fire gleamed upon its top. On a boulder beside the fire sat the strange, dark chief and about him, like spirits of the Dark World, sat Pictish warriors, in a silent ring.

They led me before the chief, if such he was, and I stood there, gazing at him without defiance or fear. And I sensed that here was a man different from any I had ever seen. I was aware of a certain Force, a certain unseen Power radiating from the man, that seemed to set him apart from common men. It was as though from the heights of self-conquest he looked down upon men, brooding, inscrutable, fraught with the ages’ knowledge, sombre with the ages’ wisdom. Chin in hand he sat, dark unfathomed eyes fixed upon me.

“Who are you?”

“A Roman citizen.”

“A Roman soldier. One of the wolves who have torn the world for far too many centuries.”

Among the warriors passed a murmur, fleeting as the whisper of the night wind, sinister as the flash of a wolf’s fang.

“There be those whom my people hate more than they do the Romans,” said he. “But you are a Roman, to be sure. And yet, methinks they must grow taller Romans than I had thought. And your beard, what turned it yellow?”

At the sardonic tone, I threw back my head, and though my skin crawled at the thought of the swords at my back, I answered proudly.

“By birth I am a Norseman.”

A savage, blood-lusting yell went up from the crouching horde and in an instant they surged forward. A single motion of the chief’s hand sent them slinking back, eyes blazing. His own eyes had never left my face.

“My tribe are fools,” said he. “For they hate the Norse even more than they do the Romans. For the Norse harry our shores incessantly; but it is Rome that they should hate.”

“But you are no Pict!”

“I am a Mediterranean.”

“Of Caledonia?”

“Of the world.”

“Who are you?”

“Bran Mak Morn.”

“What!” I had expected a monstrosity, a hideous deformed giant, a ferocious dwarf built in keeping with the rest of his race.

“You are not as these.”

“I am as the race was,” he replied. “The line of chiefs has kept its blood pure through the ages, scouring the world for women of the Old Race.”

“Why does your race hate all men?” I asked curiously. “Your ferocity is a by-word among the nations.”

“Why should we not hate?” His dark eyes lit with a sudden fierce glitter. “Trampled upon by every wandering tribe, driven from our fertile lands, forced into the waste places of the world, deformed in body and in mind. Look upon me. I am what the race once was. Look about you. A race of ape-

men, we that were the highest type of men the world could boast."

I shuddered in spite of myself at the hate that vibrated in his deep, resonant voice.

Between the lines of warriors came a girl, who sought the chief's side and nestled close to him. A slim, shy little beauty, not much more than a child. Mak Morn's face softened somewhat as he put his arm about her slender body. Then the brooding look returned to his dark eyes.

"My sister, Norseman," he said. "I am told that a rich merchant of Corinium has offered a thousand pieces of gold to any who brings her to him."

My hair prickled for I seemed to sense a sinister minor note in the Caledonian's even voice. The moon sank below the western horizon, touching the heather with a red tinge, so that the heath looked like a sea of gore in the eery light.

The chief's voice broke the stillness. "The merchant sent a spy past the Wall. I sent him his head."

I started. A man stood before me. I had not seen him come. A very old man he was, clad only in a loin cloth. A long white beard fell to his waist and he was tattooed from crown to heel. His leathery face was creased with a million wrinkles, his hide was scaly as a snake's. From beneath sparse white brows his great strange eyes blazed, as though seeing weird visions. The warriors stirred restlessly. The girl shrank back into Mak Morn's arms as if frightened.

"The god of War rides the night wind," spoke the wizard suddenly, in a high eery voice. "The kites scent blood. Strange feet tramp the roads of Alba. Strange oars beat the Northern Sea."

"Lend us your craft, wizard," commanded Mak Morn imperiously.

"You have displeased the old gods, chief," the other answered. "The temples of the Serpent are deserted. The white god of the moon feasts no more on man flesh. The lords of the air look down from their ramparts and are not pleased. Hai, hai! They say a chief has turned from the path."

"Enough." Mak Morn's voice was harsh. "The power of the Serpent is broken. The neophytes offer up no more humans to their dark divinities. If I lift the Pictish nation out of the darkness of the valley of abysmal savagery, I brook no opposition by prince or priest. Mark my words, wizard."

The old man raised great eyes, weirdly alit, and stared into my face.

“I see a yellow haired savage,” came his flesh-crawling whisper. “I see a strong body and a strong mind, such as a chief might feast upon.”

An impatient ejaculation from Mak Morn.

The girl put her arms about him timidly and whispered in his ear.

“Some characteristics of humanity and kindliness remain still with the Picts,” said he, and I sensed the fierce self-mockery in his tone. “The child asks me that you go free.”

Though he spoke in the Celtic language, the warriors understood, and muttered discontentedly.

“No!” exclaimed the wizard violently.

The opposition steeled the chief’s resolution. He rose to his feet.

“I say the Norseman goes free at dawn.”

A disapproving silence answered him.

“Dare any of ye to step upon the heath and match steel with me?” he challenged.

The wizard spoke, “Hark ye, chief. I have outlived a hundred years. I have seen chiefs and conquerors come and go. In midnight forests have I battled the magic of the Druids. Long have ye mocked my power, man of the Old Race, and here I defy ye. I bid ye unto the combat.”

No word was spoken. The two men advanced into the fire-light which threw its fitful gleam into the shadows.

“If I conquer, the Serpent coils again, the Wild-cat screeches again, and thou art my slave forever. If thou dost conquer, my arts are thine and I will serve thee.”

Wizard and chief faced each other. The lurid flame-flares lit their faces. Their eyes met, clashed. Yes, the combat between the eyes and the souls behind them was as clearly evident as though they had been battling with swords. The wizard’s eyes widened, the chief’s narrowed. Terrific forces seemed to emanate from each; unseen powers in combat swirled about them. And I was

vaguely aware that it was but another phase of the eon-old warfare. The battle between Old and New. Behind the wizard lurked thousands of years of dark secrets, sinister mysteries, frightful nebulous shapes, monsters half hidden in the fogs of antiquity. Behind the chief, the clear strong light of the coming Day, the first kindling of civilization, the clean strength of a new man with a new and mighty mission. The wizard was the Stone Age typified; the chief, the coming civilization. The destiny of the Pictish race, perhaps, hinged on that struggle.

Both men seemed in the grasp of terrific effort. The veins stood out upon the chief's forehead. The eyes of both blazed and glittered. Then a gasp broke from the wizard. With a shriek he caught at his eyes, and slumped to the heather like an empty sack.

"Enough!" he gasped. "You conquer, chief." He rose, shaken, submissive.

The tense, crouching lines relaxed, sat in their places, eyes fixed on the chief. Mak Morn shook his head as if to clear it. He stepped to the boulder and sat him down, and the girl threw her arms about him, murmuring to him in a gentle, joyous voice.

"The Sword of the Picts is swift," mumbled the wizard. "The Arm of the Pict is Strong. Hai! They say a mighty one has risen among the Western Men."

"Gaze ye upon the ancient Fire of the Lost Race, Wolf of the Heather! Aai, hai! They say a chief has risen to lead the race onward."

The wizard stooped above the coals of the fire which had gone out, muttering to himself.

Stirring the coals, mumbling in his white beard, he half droned, half sang a weird chant, of little meaning or rhyme, but with a kind of wild rhythm, remarkably strange and eery.

"O'er lakes agleam the old gods dream;

Ghosts stride the heather dim.

The night winds croon; the eery moon

Slips o'er the ocean's rim.

From peak to peak the witches shriek.

The gray wolf seeks the height.

Like gold sword sheath, far o’er the heath

Glimmers the wandering light.”

The ancient stirred the coals, pausing now and then to toss on them some weird object, keeping time with his motions with his chant.

“Gods of heather, gods of lake,

Bestial fiends of swamp and brake;

White god riding on the moon,

Jackal-jawed, with voice of loon;

Serpentgod whose scaly coils

Grasp the Universe in toils;

See, the Unseen Sages sit;

See the council fires alit.

See I stir the glowing coals,

Toss on manes of seven foals.

Seven foals all golden shod

From the herds of Alba’s god.

Now in numbers one and six,

Shape and place the magic sticks.

Scented wood brought from afar,

From the land of Morning Star.

Hewn from limbs of sandal-trees,

Brought far o’er the Eastern Seas.

Sea-snakes’ fangs, see now, I fling,

Pinions of a sea-gull’s wing.

Now the magic dust I toss,

Men are shadows, life is dross.

Now the flames crawl, ere they blaze,

Now the smokes rise in a haze.

Fanned by far off ocean-blast

Leaps the tale of distant past.”

In and out among the coals licked the thin red flames, now leaping in swift upward spurts, now vanishing, now catching the tinder thrown upon it, with a dry crackle that sounded through the stillness. Wisps of smoke began to curl upward in a mingling, hazy cloud.

“Dimly, dimly glimmers the starlight,

Over the heather-hill, over the vale.

Gods of the Old Land brood o’er the far night,

Things of the Darkness ride on the gale.

Now while the fire smoulders, while smokes enfold it,

Now ere it leap into clear, mystic flame,

Harken once more (else the dark gods withhold it),

Hark to the tale of the race without name.”

The smoke floated upward, swirling about the wizard; as through a dense fog his fierce yellow eyes peered. As if across far spaces his voice came floating, with a strange impression of disembodiment. With a weird intonation as though the voice were, not the voice of the ancient, but a something detached, a something apart; as if disembodied ages, and not the wizard’s mind, spake through him.

A wilder setting I have seldom seen. Overhead all darkness, scarce a star a-glitter, the waving tentacles of the Northern Lights reaching lurid banners across the sullen sky; sombre slopes stretching away to mingle with vagueness, a dim sea of silent, waving heather; and on that bare, lone hill, the half-human horde crouching like sombre specters of another world, their bestial faces now merging in the shadows, now touched with blood as the fire-light veered and flickered. And Bran Mak Morn sitting like a statue of bronze, his face thrown into bold relief by the light of the leaping flames. And that weird face, limned by the eery light, with its great, blazing yellow eyes, and its long, snow-white beard.

“A mighty race, the men of the Mediterranean.”

Savage faces alit, they leaned forward. And I found myself thinking that the wizard was right. No man might civilize those primeval savages. They were untamable, unconquerable. The spirit of the wild, of the Stone Age was theirs.

“Older than the snow-crowned peaks of Caledon.”

The warriors leaned forward, evincing eagerness and anticipation. I sensed that the tale ever intrigued them, though doubtless they had heard it a hundred times from a hundred chiefs and ancients.

“Norseman,” suddenly, breaking the train of his discourse. “What lies beyond the Western Channel?”

“Why, the isle of Hibernia.”

“And beyond?”

“The isles that the Celts call Aran.”

“And beyond?”

“Why, in sooth I know not. Human knowledge pauses there. No ship has sailed those seas. The learned men call it Thule. The Unknown, the realm of illusion, the edge of the world.”

“Ha ha! That mighty western ocean washes the shores of continents unknown, islands unguessed.

“Far, far across the great, wave tossed vastiness of the Atlantic lie two great continents, so vast that the smaller would dwarf all Europe. Twin lands of immense antiquity; lands of ancient, crumbling civilization. Lands in which roamed tribes of men wise in all craftmanship, while this land ye call Europe was yet a vast, reptile-haunted swamp, a dank forest known but to apes.

“So mighty are these continents that they span the world, from the snows of the north to the snows of the south. And beyond them lies a great ocean, the Sea of Silent Waters. *1 Many islands are upon that sea, and those islands were once the mountain peaks of a great land – the lost land of Lemuria.

“And the continents are twin continents, joined by a narrow neck of land. The western coast of that northern continent is fierce and rugged. Huge mountains rear skyward. But those peaks were islands upon a time, and to those islands came the Nameless Tribe, wandering down from the north, so many thousand years ago that a man would grow a-weary numbering them. A thousand miles to the north and west had the tribe come into being, there upon the broad and fertile plains close by the northern channels, which divide the continent of the north from Asia.”

“Asia!” I exclaimed, bewildered.

The ancient jerked up his head angrily, eyeing me savagely. Then he continued.

“There, in the dim haze of unnamed past, had the tribe won up from crawling sea-thing to ape and from ape to ape-man and from ape-man to savage.

“Savages they were still when they came down the coast, fierce and war-like.

“Skilled in the chase they were, for they had lived by the hunt for untold centuries. Strong built men they were, not tall nor huge, but lean and muscular like leopards, swift and mighty. No nation might stand before them. And they were the first Men.

“Still they clad themselves in the hides of beasts and their stone implements were crudely chipped. Upon the western islands they took their abode, the islands that lay laughing in a sunny sea. And there they had their habitation for thousands and thousands of years. For centuries upon the western coast. The isles of the west were wondrous isles, lapped in sun-lit seas, rich and fertile. There the tribe laid aside the arms of war and taught themselves the arts of peace. There they learned to polish their implements of stone. There they learned to raise grain and fruits, to cultivate the soil; and they were content and the harvest gods laughed. And they learned to spin and to weave and to build them huts. And they became skilled in the working of pelts, and in the making of pottery.

“Far to the west, across the roaming waves, lay the vast, dim land of Lemuria. And anon came fleets of canoes bearing strange raiders, the half-human Men of the Sea. Perhaps from some strange sea-monster had those sprung, for they were scaly like unto a shark and they could swim for hours under the water. Ever the tribe beat them back but often they came, for renegades of the tribe fled to Lemuria. To the east and the south great forest stretched away to the horizons, peopled by ferocious beasts and ferocious ape-men.

“So the centuries glided by on the wings of Time. Stronger and stronger grew the Nameless Tribe, more skillful in craftmanship; less skilled in war and the chase. And slowly the Lemurians fared on the upward climb.

“Then, upon a day, a mighty earth-quake rocked the world. Sky mingled with sea and the land reeled between. With the thunder of gods at war, the islands of the west plunged upward and lifted from the sea. And lo, they were mountains upon the new-formed western coast of the northern continent. And lo, the land of Lemuria sank beneath the waves, leaving only a great mountainous island, surrounded by many isles which had been her highest peaks.

“And upon the western coast, mighty volcanos roared and bellowed and their flaming spate rushed down the coast and swept away all traces of the civilization that was being conceived. From a fertile vineyard the land became a desert.

“Eastward fled the tribe, driving the ape-men before them, until they came upon broad and rich plains far to the east. There they abode for centuries. Then the great ice-fields came down from the Arctics and the tribe fled before them. Then followed a thousand years of wandering.

“Down into the southern continent they fled, ever driving the beast-men *2 before them. And finally, in a great war, they drove them forth entirely. Those fled far to the south and by means of the marshy islands that then spanned the sea, crossed into Africa, thence wandering up into Europe, where there were then no men, except ape-men.

“Then the Lemurians, the Second Race, came into the northern land. Far up the scale of life had they made their way and they were a swart, strange race; short, broad men were they, with strange eyes like unto unknown seas. Little they knew of cultivation or of craft, but they possessed strange knowledge of curious architecture and from the Nameless Tribe had they learned to make implements of polished obsidian and jade and argillite.

“And ever the great ice fields pushed south and ever the Nameless Tribe wandered before them. No ice came into the southern continent nor even near it, but it was a dank, swampy land, serpent-haunted. So they made them boats and sailed to the sea-girt land of Atlantis. Now the Atlanteans *3 were the Third Race. They were physical giants, finely made men, who inhabited caves and lived by the chase. They had no skill in artizanship, but were artists. When they were not hunting or warring among themselves, they spent their time in painting and drawing pictures of men and beasts upon the walls of their caverns. But they could not match the Nameless Tribe in craft, and they were driven forth. They, too, made their way to Europe, and there waged savage warfare with the beast-men who had gone before them.

“Then there was war among the tribes and the conquerors drove forth the conquered. And among those was a very wise, very ancient wizard and he put a curse upon the land of Atlantis, that it should be unknown to the tribes of men. No boat from Atlantis should ever gain another shore, no foreign sail should ever sight the broad beaches of Atlantis. Girt by unsailed seas should the land lie unknown until ships with the heads of serpents should come down from the northern seas and four hosts should battle on the Isle of Sea-fogs and a great chief should rise among the people of the Nameless Tribe.

“So those crossed to Africa, oaring from island to island, and went up the coast until they came to the Middle Sea *4 which lay enjeweled amid sunny shores.

“There did the tribe abide for centuries, and grew strong and mighty, and from thence did they spread all over the world. From the Afric deserts to the Baltic forests, from the Nile to the peaks of Alba they ranged, growing their grain,

grazing their cattle, weaving their cloth. They built their crannogs in the Alpen lakes; they reared their temples of stone upon the plains of Britain. They drove the Atlanteans before them, and they smote the red-haired reindeer men.

“Then from the North came the Celts, bearing swords and spears of bronze. From the dim lands of Mighty Snows they came, from the shores of the far North Sea. And they were the Fourth Race. The Picts fled before them. For they were mighty men, tall and strong, lean built and gray eyed, with tawny hair. All over the world Celt and Pict battled, and ever the Celt conquered. For in the long ages of peace, the tribes had forgotten the arts of war. To the waste places of the world they fled.

“And so fled the Picts of Alba; to the west and to the north and there they mingled with the red-haired giants which they had driven from the plains in ages gone by. Such is not the way of the Pict but shall tradition serve a nation whose back is at the wall?

“And so as the ages passed, the race changed. The slim, small black haired people, mingling with the huge, coarse-featured, red-haired savages, formed a strange, distorted race; twisted in soul as in body. And they grew fierce and cunning in warfare; but forgotten the old arts. Forgotten the loom and the kiln and the mill. But the line of chiefs remained untainted. And such art thou, Bran Mak Morn, Wolf of the Heather.”

For a moment there was silence; the silent ring still harkening dreamily, as if to the echo of the wizard’s voice. The night wind whispered by. The fire caught the tinder and burst suddenly into vivid flame, flinging lean red arms to catch the shadows.

The wizard’s voice took up its drone.

“The glory of the Nameless Tribe is vanished; like the snow that falls on the sea; like the smoke that rises in the air. Mingling with past eternities. Vanished the glory of Atlantis; fading the dark empire of the Lemurians. The people of the Stone Age are melting like hoar-frost before the sun. Out of the night we came; into the night we go. All are shadows. A shadow race are we. Our day is past. Wolves roam the temples of the Moon-God. Water serpents coil amid our sunken cities. Silence broods over Lemuria; a curse haunts Atlantis. Red skinned savages roam the western lands, wandering o’er the valley of the Western River, befouling the entempled ramparts which the men of Lemuria reared in worship of the God of the Sea. And to the south, the empire of the Toltecs of Lemuria is crumbling. So the First Races are passing.

And the Men of the New Dawn grow mighty."

The ancient took a flaming brand from the fire and with a motion incredibly swift, inscribed the circle and triangle in the air. And strangely, the mystic symbol seemed to hover in the air, for a moment, a ring of fire.

"The circle without beginning," droned the wizard. "The circle unending. The Snake with its tail in its mouth, that encompasses the Universe. And the Mystic Three. Beginning, passivity, ending. Creation, preservation, destruction. Destruction, preservation, creation. The Frog, the Egg, and the Serpent. The Serpent, the Egg, and the Frog. And the Elements: Fire, Air and Water. And the phallic symbol. The Fire-god laughs."

I was aware of the fierce, almost ferocious intensity with which the Picts stared into the fire. The flames leaped and blazed. Smoke billowed up and vanished and a strange yellow haze took its place, that was neither fire, smoke nor fog, and yet seemed a blending of all three. World and sky seemed to merge with the flames. I became, not a man, but a pair of disembodied Eyes.

Then somewhere in the yellow fog vague pictures began to show, looming and vanishing. I sensed that the past was gliding by in a dim panorama. There was a battle-field and on one side were many men such as Bran Mak Morn, but unlike him in that they seemed unused to fray. On the other side was a horde of tall gaunt men, armed with sword and spears of bronze. The Gaels!

Then on another field another battle was in progress and I sensed that hundreds of years had passed. Again the Gaels charged to battle with their arms of bronze, but this time it was they who reeled back in defeat, before a host of huge, yellow-haired warriors, armed also with bronze. The battle marked the coming of the Brythons who gave their name to the isle of Britain.

Then a serried line of vague and fleeting scenes, which passed too rapidly to be distinguished. They gave the impression of great deeds, mighty happenings, but only dim shadows showed. For an instant a dim face loomed. A strong face, with steel gray eyes, and yellow mustaches drooping over thin lips. I sensed that it was that other Bran, the Celtic Brennus whose Gallic hordes had sacked Rome.

Then in its place another face stood out with startling boldness. The face of a young man, haughty, arrogant, with a magnificent brow, but with lines of sensual cruelty about his mouth. The face of both a demi-god and a degenerate.

Caesar!

A shadowy beach. A dim forest; the crash of battle. The legions shattering the hordes of Caractacus.

Then vaguely, swiftly, passed shadows of the pomp and glory of Rome. There were her legions returning in triumph, driving before them hundreds of chained captives. There were shown the corpulent senators and nobles at their luxurious baths and their banquets and their debauches. There were shown the effeminate, slothful merchants and nobles lolling in lustful ease in Ostia, in Massilia, in Aqua Sulae. Then in abrupt contrast, the gathering hordes of the outer world. The fierce eyed, yellow bearded Norsemen; the huge bodied Germanic tribes; the wild, flame-haired savages of Wales and Damnonia, and their allies, the Pictish Silures. The past had faded; present and future took its place!

Then, a vague holocaust, in which nations moved and armies and men faded and shifted.

“Rome falls!” suddenly the wizard’s fiercely exultant voice broke the silence. “The Vandal’s foot spurns the Forum. A savage horde marches along the Via Appia. Yellow haired raiders violate the Vestal Virgins. And Rome falls!”

A ferocious yell of triumph went winging up into the night.

“I see Britain beneath the heel of the Norse invaders. I see the Picts trooping down from the mountains. There is rapine, fire and warfare.”

In the fire-fog leaped the face of Bran Mak Morn.

“Hale the up-lifter! I see the Pictish nation striding upward toward the new light!

“Wolf on the height

Mocking the night;

Slow comes the light

Of a nation’s new dawn.

Shadow hordes massed

Out of the past.

Fame that shall last

Strides on and on.

Over the vale

Thunders the gale

Bearing the tale

Of a nation up-lifted.

Flee, wolf and kite!

Fame that is bright”

From the east came stealing a dim gray radiance. In the ghostly light Bran Mak Morn’s face showed bronze once more, expressionless, immobile; dark eyes gazing unwaveringly into the fire, seeing there his mighty ambitions, his dreams of empire fading into smoke.

“For what we could not keep by battle, we have held by cunning for years and centuries unnumbered. But the New Races rise like a great tidal wave and the Old gives place. In the dim mountains of Galloway shall the nation make its last fierce stand. And as Bran Mak Morn falls, so vanishes the Lost Fire – forever. From the centuries, from the eons.”

And as he spoke, the fire gathered itself into one great flame that leaped high in the air, and in mid-air vanished.

And over the far eastern mountains floated the dim dawn.

Kings of the Night

Kings of the Night

The Caesar lolled on his ivory throne –

His iron legions came

To break a king in a land unknown,

And a race without a name.

The Song of Bran

The dagger flashed downward. A sharp cry broke in a gasp. The form on the rough altar twitched convulsively and lay still. The jagged flint edge sawed at the crimsoned breast, and thin bony fingers, ghastly dyed, tore out the still twitching heart. Under matted white brows, sharp eyes gleamed with a ferocious intensity.

Besides the slayer, four men stood about the crude pile of stones that formed the altar of the God of Shadows. One was of medium height, lithely built, scantily clad, whose black hair was confined by a narrow iron band in the center of which gleamed a single red jewel. Of the others, two were dark like the first. But where he was lithe, they were stocky and misshapen, with knotted limbs, and tangled hair falling over sloping brows. His face denoted intelligence and implacable will; theirs merely a beast-like ferocity. The fourth man had little in common with the rest. Nearly a head taller, though his hair was black as theirs, his skin was comparatively light and he was gray-eyed. He eyed the proceedings with little favor.

And, in truth, Cormac of Connacht was little at ease. The Druids of his own isle of Erin had strange dark rites of worship, but nothing like this. Dark trees shut in this grim scene, lit by a single torch. Through the branches moaned an eery night-wind. Cormac was alone among men of a strange race and he had just seen the heart of a man ripped from his still pulsing body. Now the ancient priest, who looked scarcely human, was glaring at the throbbing thing. Cormac shuddered, glancing at him who wore the jewel. Did Bran Mak Morn, king of the Picts, believe that this white-bearded old butcher could foretell events by scanning a bleeding human heart? The dark eyes of the king were inscrutable. There were strange depths to the man that Cormac could not fathom, nor any other man.

“The portents are good!” exclaimed the priest wildly, speaking more to the two chieftains than to Bran. “Here from the pulsing heart of a captive Roman I read – defeat for the arms of Rome! Triumph for the sons of the heather!”

The two savages murmured beneath their breath, their fierce eyes smoldering.

“Go and prepare your clans for battle,” said the king, and they lumbered away with the ape-like gait assumed by such stunted giants. Paying no more heed to the priest who was examining the ghastly ruin on the altar, Bran beckoned to Cormac. The Gael followed him with alacrity. Once out of that grim grove, under the starlight, he breathed more freely. They stood on an eminence, looking out over long swelling undulations of gently waving heather. Near at hand a few fires twinkled, their fewness giving scant evidence of the hordes of tribesmen who lay close by. Beyond these were more fires and beyond these still more, which last marked the camp of Cormac’s own men, hard-riding, hard-fighting Gaels, who were of that band which was just beginning to get a foothold on the western coast of Caledonia – the nucleus of what was later to become the kingdom of Dalriadia. To the left of these, other fires gleamed.

And far away to the south were more fires – mere pinpoints of light. But even at that distance the Pictish king and his Celtic ally could see that these fires were laid out in regular order.

“The fires of the legions,” muttered Bran. “The fires that have lit a path around the world. The men who light those fires have trampled the races under their iron heels. And now – we of the heather have our backs at the wall. What will fall on the morrow?”

“Victory for us, says the priest,” answered Cormac.

Bran made an impatient gesture. “Moonlight on the ocean. Wind in the fir tops. Do you think that I put faith in such mummery? Or that I enjoyed the butchery of a captive legionary? I must hearten my people; it was for Gron and Bocah that I let old Gonar read the portents. The warriors will fight better.”

“And Gonar?”

Bran laughed. “Gonar is too old to believe – anything. He was high priest of the Shadows a score of years before I was born. He claims direct descent from that Gonar who was a wizard in the days of Brule, the Spear-slayer who was the first of my line. No man knows how old he is – sometimes I think he is the original Gonar himself!”

“At least,” said a mocking voice, and Cormac started as a dim shape appeared at his side, “at least I have learned that in order to keep the faith and trust of the people, a wise man must appear to be a fool. I know secrets that would blast even your brain, Bran, should I speak them. But in order that the people

may believe in me, I must descend to such things as they think proper magic – and prance and yell and rattle snakeskins, and dabble about in human blood and chicken livers."

Cormac looked at the ancient with new interest. The semi-madness of his appearance had vanished. He was no longer the charlatan, the spell-mumbling shaman. The starlight lent him a dignity which seemed to increase his very height, so that he stood like a white-bearded patriarch.

"Bran, your doubt lies there." The lean arm pointed to the fourth ring of fires.

"Aye," the king nodded gloomily. "Cormac – you know as well as I. Tomorrow's battle hinges upon that circle of fires. With the chariots of the Britons and your own Western horsemen, our success would be certain, but – surely the devil himself is in the heart of every Northman! You know how I trapped that band – how they swore to fight for me against Rome! And now that their chief, Rognar, is dead, they swear that they will be led only by a king of their own race! Else they will break their vow and go over to the Romans. Without them we are doomed, for we can not change our former plan."

"Take heart, Bran," said Gonar. "Touch the jewel in your iron crown. Mayhap it will bring you aid."

Bran laughed bitterly. "Now you talk as the people think. I am no fool to twist with empty words. What of the gem? It is a strange one, truth, and has brought me luck ere now. But I need now, no jewels, but the allegiance of three hundred fickle Northmen who are the only warriors among us who may stand the charge of the legions on foot."

"But the jewel, Bran, the jewel!" persisted Gonar.

"Well, the jewel!" cried Bran impatiently. "It is older than this world. It was old when Atlantis and Lemuria sank into the sea. It was given to Brule, the Spear-slayer, first of my line, by the Atlantean Kull, king of Valusia, in the days when the world was young. But shall that profit us now?"

"Who knows?" asked the wizard obliquely. "Time and space exist not. There was no past, and there shall be no future. NOW is all. All things that ever were, are, or ever will be, transpire *now*. Man is forever at the center of what we call time and space. I have gone into yesterday and tomorrow and both were as real as today – which is like the dreams of ghosts! But let me sleep and talk with Gonar. Mayhap he shall aid us."

“What means he?” asked Cormac, with a slight twitching of his shoulders, as the priest strode away in the shadows.

“He has ever said that the first Gonar comes to him in his dreams and talks with him,” answered Bran. “I have seen him perform deeds that seemed beyond human ken. I know not. I am but an unknown king with an iron crown, trying to lift a race of savages out of the slime into which they have sunk. Let us look to the camps.”

As they walked Cormac wondered. By what strange freak of fate had such a man risen among this race of savages, survivors of a darker, grimmer age? Surely he was an atavism, an original type of the days when the Picts ruled all Europe, before their primitive empire fell before the bronze swords of the Gauls. Cormac knew how Bran, rising by his own efforts from the negligent position of the son of a Wolf clan chief, had to an extent united the tribes of the heather and now claimed kingship over all Caledon. But his rule was loose and much remained before the Pictish clans would forget their feuds and present a solid front to foreign foes. On the battle of the morrow, the first pitched battle between the Picts under their king and the Romans, hinged the future of the rising Pictish kingdom.

Bran and his ally walked through the Pictish camp where the swart warriors lay sprawled about their small fires, sleeping or gnawing half-cooked food. Cormac was impressed by their silence. A thousand men camped here, yet the only sounds were occasional low guttural intonations. The silence of the Stone Age rested in the souls of these men.

They were all short – most of them crooked of limb. Giant dwarfs; Bran Mak Morn was a tall man among them. Only the older men were bearded and they scantily, but their black hair fell about their eyes so that they peered fiercely from under the tangle. They were barefoot and clad scantily in wolfskins. Their arms consisted in short barbed swords of iron, heavy black bows, arrows tipped with flint, iron and copper, and stone-headed mallets. Defensive armor they had none, save for a crude shield of hide-covered wood; many had worked bits of metal into their tangled manes as a slight protection against sword-cuts. Some few, sons of long lines of chiefs, were smooth-limbed and lithe like Bran, but in the eyes of all gleamed the unquenchable savagery of the primeval.

These men are fully savages, thought Cormac, worse than the Gauls, Britons and Germans. Can the old legends be true – that they reigned in a day when

strange cities rose where now the sea rolls? And that they survived the flood that washed those gleaming empires under, sinking again into that savagery from which they once had risen?

Close to the encampment of the tribesmen were the fires of a group of Britons – members of fierce tribes who lived south of the Roman Wall but who dwelt in the hills and forests to the west and defied the power of Rome. Powerfully built men they were, with blazing blue eyes and shocks of tousled yellow hair, such men as had thronged the Ceanntish beaches when Caesar brought the Eagles into the Isles. These men, like the Picts, wore no armor, and were clad scantily in coarse-worked cloth and deerskin sandals. They bore small round bucklers of hard wood, braced with bronze, to be worn on the left arm, and long heavy bronze swords with blunt points. Some had bows, though the Britons were indifferent archers. Their bows were shorter than the Picts' and effective only at close range. But ranged close by their fires were the weapons that had made the name Briton a word of terror to Pict, Roman and Norse raider alike. Within the circle of firelight stood fifty bronze chariots with long cruel blades curving out from the sides. One of these blades could dismember half a dozen men at once. Tethered close by under the vigilant eyes of their guards grazed the chariot horses – big, rangy steeds, swift and powerful.

"Would that we had more of them!" mused Bran. "With a thousand chariots and my bowmen I could drive the legions into the sea."

"The free British tribes must eventually fall before Rome," said Cormac. "It would seem they would rush to join you in your war."

Bran made a helpless gesture. "The fickleness of the Celt. They can not forget old feuds. Our ancient men have told us how they would not even unite against Caesar when the Romans first came. They will not make head against a common foe together. These men came to me because of some dispute with their chief, but I can not depend on them when they are not actually fighting."

Cormac nodded. "I know; Caesar conquered Gaul by playing one tribe against another. My own people shift and change with the waxing and waning of the tides. But of all Celts, the Cymry are the most changeable, the least stable. Not many centuries ago my own Gaelic ancestors wrested Erin from the Cymric Danaans, because though they outnumbered us, they opposed us as separate tribes, rather than as a nation."

"And so these Cymric Britons face Rome," said Bran. "These will aid us on the morrow. Further I can not say. But how shall I expect loyalty from alien tribes, who am not sure of my own people? Thousands lurk in the hills,

holding aloof. I am king in name only. Let me win tomorrow and they will flock to my standard; if I lose, they will scatter like birds before a cold wind."

A chorus of rough welcome greeted the two leaders as they entered the camp of Cormac's Gaels. Five hundred in number they were, tall rangy men, black-haired and gray-eyed mainly, with the bearing of men who lived by war alone. While there was nothing like close discipline among them, there was an air of more system and practical order than existed in the lines of the Picts and Britons. These men were of the last Celtic race to invade the Isles and their barbaric civilization was of much higher order than that of their Cymric kin. The ancestors of the Gaels had learned the arts of war on the vast plains of Scythia and at the courts of the Pharaohs where they had fought as mercenaries of Egypt, and much of what they learned they brought into Ireland with them. Excelling in metal work, they were armed, not with clumsy bronze swords, but with high-grade weapons of iron.

They were clad in well-woven kilts and leathern sandals. Each wore a light shirt of chain mail and a vizorless helmet, but this was all of their defensive armor. Celts, Gaelic or Brythonic, were prone to judge a man's valor by the amount of armor he wore. The Britons who faced Caesar deemed the Romans cowards because they cased themselves in metal, and many centuries later the Irish clans thought the same of the mail-clad Norman knights of Strongbow.

Cormac's warriors were horsemen. They neither knew nor esteemed the use of the bow. They bore the inevitable round, metal-braced buckler, dirks, long straight swords and light single-handed axes. Their tethered horses grazed not far away – big-boned animals, not so ponderous as those raised by the Britons, but swifter.

Bran's eyes lighted as the two strode through the camp. "These men are keen-beaked birds of war! See how they whet their axes and jest of the morrow! Would that the raiders in yon camp were as staunch as your men, Cormac! Then would I greet the legions with a laugh when they come up from the south tomorrow."

They were entering the circle of the Northmen fires. Three hundred men sat about gambling, whetting their weapons and drinking deep of the heather ale furnished them by their Pictish allies. These gazed upon Bran and Cormac with no great friendliness. It was striking to note the difference between them and the Picts and Celts – the difference in their cold eyes, their strong moody faces, their very bearing. Here was ferocity, and savagery, but not of the wild, upbursting fury of the Celt. Here was fierceness backed by grim

determination and stolid stubbornness. The charge of the British clans was terrible, overwhelming. But they had no patience; let them be balked of immediate victory and they were likely to lose heart and scatter or fall to bickering among themselves. There was the patience of the cold blue North in these seafarers – a lasting determination that would keep them steadfast to the bitter end, once their face was set toward a definite goal.

As to personal stature, they were giants; massive yet rangy. That they did not share the ideas of the Celts regarding armor was shown by the fact that they were clad in heavy scale mail shirts that reached below mid-thigh, heavy horned helmets and hardened hide leggings, reinforced, as were their shoes, with plates of iron. Their shields were huge oval affairs of hard wood, hide and brass. As to weapons, they had long iron-headed spears, heavy iron axes, and daggers. Some had long wide-bladed swords.

Cormac scarcely felt at ease with the cold magnetic eyes of these flaxen-haired men fixed upon him. He and they were hereditary foes, even though they did chance to be fighting on the same side at present – but were they?

A man came forward, a tall gaunt warrior on whose scarred, wolfish face the flickering firelight reflected deep shadows. With his wolfskin mantle flung carelessly about his wide shoulders, and the great horns on his helmet adding to his height, he stood there in the swaying shadows, like some half-human thing, a brooding shape of the dark barbarism that was soon to engulf the world.

“Well, Wulfhere,” said the Pictish king, “you have drunk the mead of council and have spoken about the fires – what is your decision?”

The Northman’s eyes flashed in the gloom. “Give us a king of our own race to follow if you wish us to fight for you.”

Bran flung out his hands. “Ask me to drag down the stars to gem your helmets! Will not your comrades follow you?”

“Not against the legions,” answered Wulfhere sullenly. “A king led us on the viking path – a king must lead us against the Romans. And Rognar is dead.”

“I am a king,” said Bran. “Will you fight for me if I stand at the tip of your fight wedge?”

“A king of our own race,” said Wulfhere doggedly. “We are all picked men of the North. We fight for none but a king, and a king must lead us – against the

legions.”

Cormac sensed a subtle threat in this repeated phrase.

“Here is a prince of Erin,” said Bran. “Will you fight for the Westerner?”

“We fight under no Celt, West or East,” growled the viking, and a low rumble of approval rose from the onlookers. “It is enough to fight by their side.”

The hot Gaelic blood rose in Cormac’s brain and he pushed past Bran, his hand on his sword. “How mean you that, pirate?”

Before Wulfhere could reply Bran interposed: “Have done! Will you fools throw away the battle before it is fought, by your madness? What of your oath, Wulfhere?”

“We swore it under Rognar; when he died from a Roman arrow we were absolved of it. We will follow only a king – against the legions.”

“But your comrades will follow you – against the heather people!” snapped Bran.

“Aye,” the Northman’s eyes met his brazenly. “Send us a king or we join the Romans tomorrow.”

Bran snarled. In his rage he dominated the scene, dwarfing the huge men who towered over him.

“Traitors! Liars! I hold your lives in my hand! Aye, draw your swords if you will – Cormac, keep your blade in its sheath. These wolves will not bite a king! Wulfhere – I spared your lives when I could have taken them.

“You came to raid the countries of the South, sweeping down from the northern sea in your galleys. You ravaged the coasts and the smoke of burning villages hung like a cloud over the shores of Caledon. I trapped you all when you were pillaging and burning – with the blood of my people on your hands. I burned your long ships and ambushed you when you followed. With thrice your number of bowmen who burned for your lives hidden in the heathered hills about you, I spared you when we could have shot you down like trapped wolves. Because I spared you, you swore to come and fight for me.”

“And shall we die because the Picts fight Rome?” rumbled a bearded raider.

“Your lives are forfeit to me; you came to ravage the South. I did not promise to send you all back to your homes in the North unharmed and loaded with loot. Your vow was to fight one battle against Rome under my standard. Then I will aid your survivors to build ships and you may go where you will, with a goodly share of the plunder we take from the legions. Rognar had kept his oath. But Rognar died in a skirmish with Roman scouts and now you, Wulfhere the Dissension-breeder, you stir up your comrades to dishonor themselves by that which a Northman hates – the breaking of the sworn word.”

“We break no oath,” snarled the viking, and the king sensed the basic Germanic stubbornness, far harder to combat than the fickleness of the fiery Celts. “Give us a king, neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, and we will die for you. If not – then we will fight tomorrow for the greatest of all kings – the emperor of Rome!”

For a moment Cormac thought that the Pictish king, in his black rage, would draw and strike the Northman dead. The concentrated fury that blazed in Bran’s dark eyes caused Wulfhere to recoil and drop a hand to his belt.

“Fool!” said Mak Morn in a low voice that vibrated with passion. “I could sweep you from the earth before the Romans are near enough to hear your death howls. Choose – fight for me on the morrow – or die tonight under a black cloud of arrows, a red storm of swords, a dark wave of chariots!”

At the mention of the chariots, the only arm of war that had ever broken the Norse shield-wall, Wulfhere changed expression, but he held his ground.

“War be it,” he said doggedly. “Or a king to lead us!”

The Northmen responded with a short deep roar and a clash of swords on shields. Bran, eyes blazing, was about to speak again when a white shape glided silently into the ring of firelight.

“Soft words, soft words,” said old Gonar tranquilly. “King, say no more. Wulfhere, you and your fellows will fight for us if you have a king to lead you?”

“We have sworn.”

“Then be at ease,” quoth the wizard; “for ere battle joins on the morrow I will send you such a king as no man on earth has followed for a hundred thousand years! A king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, but one to whom the emperor of

Rome is as but a village headman!”

While they stood undecided, Gonar took the arms of Cormac and Bran. “Come. And you, Northmen, remember your vow, and my promise which I have never broken. Sleep now, nor think to steal away in the darkness to the Roman camp, for if you escaped our shafts you would not escape either my curse or the suspicions of the legionaries.”

So the three walked away and Cormac, looking back, saw Wulfhere standing by the fire, fingering his golden beard, with a look of puzzled anger on his lean evil face.

The three walked silently through the waving heather under the far-away stars while the weird night wind whispered ghostly secrets about them.

“Ages ago,” said the wizard suddenly, “in the days when the world was young, great lands rose where now the ocean roars. On these lands thronged mighty nations and kingdoms. Greatest of all these was Valusia – Land of Enchantment. Rome is as a village compared to the splendor of the cities of Valusia. And the greatest king was Kull, who came from the land of Atlantis to wrest the crown of Valusia from a degenerate dynasty. The Picts who dwelt in the isles which now form the mountain peaks of a strange land upon the Western Ocean, were allies of Valusia, and the greatest of all the Pictish war-chiefs was Brule the Spear-slayer, first of the line men call Mak Morn.

“Kull gave to Brule the jewel which you now wear in your iron crown, oh king, after a strange battle in a dim land, and down the long ages it has come to us, ever a sign of the Mak Morn, a symbol of former greatness. When at last the sea rose and swallowed Valusia, Atlantis and Lemuria, only the Picts survived and they were scattered and few. Yet they began again the slow climb upward, and though many of the arts of civilization were lost in the great flood, yet they progressed. The art of metal-working was lost, so they excelled in the working of flint. And they ruled all the new lands flung up by the sea and now called Europe, until down from the north came younger tribes who had scarce risen from the ape when Valusia reigned in her glory, and who, dwelling in the icy lands about the Pole, knew naught of the lost splendor of the Seven Empires and little of the flood that had swept away half a world.

“And still they have come – Aryans, Celts, Germans, swarming down from the great cradle of their race which lies near the Pole. So again was the growth of the Pictish nation checked and the race hurled into savagery. Erased from the earth, on the fringe of the world with our backs to the wall we fight.

Here in Caledon is the last stand of a once mighty race. And we change. Our people have mixed with the savages of an elder age which we drove into the North when we came into the Isles, and now, save for their chieftains, such as thou, Bran, a Pict is strange and abhorrent to look upon."

"True, true," said the king impatiently, "but what has that to do — "

"Kull, king of Valusia," said the wizard imperturbably, "was a barbarian in his age as thou art in thine, though he ruled a mighty empire by the weight of his sword. Gonar, friend of Brule, your first ancestor, has been dead a hundred thousand years as we reckon time. Yet I talked with him a scant hour agone."

"You talked with his ghost —"

"Or he with mine? Did I go back a hundred thousand years, or did he come forward? If he came to me out of the past, it is not I who talked with a dead man, but he who talked with a man unborn. Past, present and future are one to a wise man. I talked to Gonar while he was alive; likewise was I alive. In a timeless, spaceless land we met and he told me many things."

The land was growing light with the birth of dawn. The heather waved and bent in long rows before the dawn wind as bowing in worship of the rising sun.

"The jewel in your crown is a magnet that draws down the eons," said Gonar. "The sun is rising – and who comes out of the sunrise?"

Cormac and the king started. The sun was just lifting a red orb above the eastern hills. And full in the glow, etched boldly against the golden rim, a man suddenly appeared. They had not seen him come. Against the golden birth of day he loomed colossal; a gigantic god from the dawn of creation. Now as he strode toward them the waking hosts saw him and sent up a sudden shout of wonder.

"Who – or what is it?" exclaimed Bran.

"Let us go to meet him, Bran," answered the wizard. "He is the king Gonar has sent to save the people of Brule."

II

"I have reached these lands but newly

From an ultimate dim Thule;

From a wild weird clime that lieth sublime

Out of Space – out of Time.”

Poe

The army fell silent as Bran, Cormac and Gonar went toward the stranger who approached in long swinging strides. As they neared him the illusion of monstrous size vanished, but they saw he was a man of great stature. At first Cormac thought him to be a Northman but a second glance told him that nowhere before had he seen such a man. He was built much like the vikings, at once massive and lithe – tigerish. But his features were not as theirs, and his square-cut, lion-like mane of hair was as black as Bran’s own. Under heavy brows glittered eyes gray as steel and cold as ice. His bronzed face, strong and inscrutable, was clean-shaven, and the broad forehead betokened a high intelligence, just as the firm jaw and thin lips showed will-power and courage. But more than all, the bearing of him, the unconscious lion-like stateliness, marked him as a natural king, a ruler of men.

Sandals of curious make were on his feet and he wore a pliant coat of strangely meshed mail which came almost to his knees. A broad belt with a great golden buckle encircled his waist, supporting a long straight sword in a heavy leather scabbard. His hair was confined by a wide, heavy golden band about his head.

Such was the man who paused before the silent group. He seemed slightly puzzled, slightly amused. Recognition flickered in his eyes. He spoke in a strange archaic Pictish which Cormac scarcely understood. His voice was deep and resonant.

“Ha, Brule, Gonar did not tell me I would dream of you!”

For the first time in his life Cormac saw the Pictish king completely thrown off his balance. He gaped, speechless. The stranger continued:

“And wearing the gem I gave you, in a circlet on your head! Last night you wore it in a ring on your finger.”

“Last night?” gasped Bran.

“Last night or a hundred thousand years ago – all one!” murmured Gonar in

evident enjoyment of the situation.

“I am not Brule,” said Bran. “Are you mad to thus speak of a man dead a hundred thousand years? He was first of my line.”

The stranger laughed unexpectedly. “Well, now I know I am dreaming! This will be a tale to tell Brule when I waken on the morrow! That I went into the future and saw men claiming descent from the Spear-slayer who is, as yet, not even married. No, you are not Brule, I see now, though you have his eyes and his bearing. But he is taller and broader in the shoulders. Yet you have his jewel – oh, well – anything can happen in a dream, so I will not quarrel with you. For a time I thought I had been transported to some other land in my sleep, and was in reality awake in a strange country, for this is the clearest dream I ever dreamed. Who are you?”

“I am Bran Mak Morn, king of the Caledonian Picts. And this ancient is Gonar, a wizard, of the line of Gonar. And this warrior is Cormac na Connacht, a prince of the isle of Erin.”

The stranger slowly shook his lion-like head. “These words sound strangely to me, save Gonar – and that one is not Gonar, though he too is old. What land is this?”

“Caledon, or Alba, as the Gaels call it.”

“And who are those squat ape-like warriors who watch us yonder, all agape?”

“They are the Picts who own my rule.”

“How strangely distorted folk are in dreams!” muttered the stranger. “And who are those shock-headed men about the chariots?”

“They are Britons – Cymry from south of the Wall.”

“What Wall?”

“The Wall built by Rome to keep the people of the heather out of Britain.”

“Britain?” the tone was curious. “I never heard of that land – and what is Rome?”

“What!” cried Bran. “You never heard of Rome, the empire that rules the world?”

“No empire rules the world,” answered the other haughtily. “The mightiest kingdom on earth is that wherein I reign.”

“And who are you?”

“Kull of Atlantis, king of Valusia!”

Cormac felt a coldness trickle down his spine. The cold gray eyes were unswerving – but this was incredible – monstrous – unnatural.

“Valusia!” cried Bran. “Why, man, the sea waves have rolled above the spires of Valusia for untold centuries!”

Kull laughed outright. “What a mad nightmare this is! When Gonar put on me the spell of deep sleep last night – or this night! – in the secret room of the inner palace, he told me I would dream strange things, but this is more fantastic than I reckoned. And the strangest thing is, I know I am dreaming!”

Gonar interposed as Bran would have spoken. “Question not the acts of the gods,” muttered the wizard. “You are king because in the past you have seen and seized opportunities. The gods or the first Gonar have sent you this man. Let me deal with him.”

Bran nodded, and while the silent army gaped in speechless wonder, just within ear-shot, Gonar spoke: “Oh great king, you dream, but is not all life a dream? How reckon you but that your former life is but a dream from which you have just awakened? Now we dream-folk have our wars and our peace, and just now a great host comes up from the south to destroy the people of Brule. Will you aid us?”

Kull grinned with pure zest. “Aye! I have fought battles in dreams ere now, have slain and been slain and was amazed when I woke from my visions. And at times, as now, dreaming I have known I dreamed. See, I pinch myself and feel it, but I know I dream for I have felt the pain of fierce wounds, in dreams. Yes, people of my dream, I will fight for you against the other dream-folk. Where are they?”

“And that you enjoy the dream more,” said the wizard subtly, “forget that it is a dream and pretend that by the magic of the first Gonar, and the quality of the jewel you gave Brule, that now gleams on the crown of the Morni, you have in truth been transported forward into another, wilder age where the people of Brule fight for their life against a stronger foe.”

For a moment the man who called himself king of Valusia seemed startled; a strange look of doubt, almost of fear, clouded his eyes. Then he laughed.

“Good! Lead on, wizard.”

But now Bran took charge. He had recovered himself and was at ease. Whether he thought, like Cormac, that this was all a gigantic hoax arranged by Gonar, he showed no sign.

“King Kull, see you those men yonder who lean on their long-shafted axes as they gaze upon you?”

“The tall men with the golden hair and beards?”

“Aye – our success in the coming battle hinges on them. They swear to go over to the enemy if we give them not a king to lead them – their own having been slain. Will you lead them to battle?”

Kull’s eyes glowed with appreciation. “They are men such as my own Red Slayers, my picked regiment. I will lead them.”

“Come then.”

The small group made their way down the slope, through throngs of warriors who pushed forward eagerly to get a better view of the stranger, then pressed back as he approached. An undercurrent of tense whispering ran through the horde.

The Northmen stood apart in a compact group. Their cold eyes took in Kull and he gave back their stares, taking in every detail of their appearance.

“Wulfhere,” said Bran, ”we have brought you a king. I hold you to your oath.”

“Let him speak to us,” said the viking harshly.

“He can not speak your tongue,” answered Bran, knowing that the Northmen knew nothing of the legends of his race. “He is a great king of the South — ”

“He comes out of the past,” broke in the wizard calmly. “He was the greatest of all kings, long ago.”

“A dead man!” The vikings moved uneasily and the rest of the horde pressed forward, drinking in every word. But Wulfhere scowled: “Shall a ghost lead

living men? You bring us a man you say is dead. We will not follow a corpse."

"Wulfhere," said Bran in still passion, "you are a liar and a traitor. You set us this task, thinking it impossible. You yearn to fight under the Eagles of Rome. We have brought you a king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton and you deny your vow!"

"Let him fight me, then!" howled Wulfhere in uncontrollable wrath, swinging his ax about his head in a glittering arc. "If your dead man overcomes me – then my people will follow you. If I overcome him, you shall let us depart in peace to the camp of the legions!"

"Good!" said the wizard. "Do you agree, wolves of the North?"

A fierce yell and a brandishing of swords was the answer. Bran turned to Kull, who had stood silent, understanding nothing of what was said. But the Atlantean's eyes gleamed. Cormac felt that those cold eyes had looked on too many such scenes not to understand something of what had passed.

"This warrior says you must fight him for the leadership," said Bran, and Kull, eyes glittering with growing battle-joy, nodded: "I guessed as much. Give us space."

"A shield and a helmet!" shouted Bran, but Kull shook his head.

"I need none," he growled. "Back and give us room to swing our steel!"

Men pressed back on each side, forming a solid ring about the two men, who now approached each other warily. Kull had drawn his sword and the great blade shimmered like a live thing in his hand. Wulfhere, scarred by a hundred savage fights, flung aside his wolfskin mantle and came in cautiously, fierce eyes peering over the top of his out-thrust shield, ax half lifted in his right hand.

Suddenly when the warriors were still many feet apart Kull sprang. His attack brought a gasp from men used to deeds of prowess; for like a leaping tiger he shot through the air and his sword crashed on the quickly lifted shield. Sparks flew and Wulfhere's ax hacked in, but Kull was under its sweep and as it swished viciously above his head he thrust upward and sprang out again, cat-like. His motions had been too quick for the eye to follow. The upper edge of Wulfhere's shield showed a deep cut, and there was a long rent in his mail shirt where Kull's sword had barely missed the flesh beneath.

Cormac, trembling with the terrible thrill of the fight, wondered at this sword that could thus slice through scale-mail. And the blow that gashed the shield should have shattered the blade. Yet not a notch showed in the Valusian steel! Surely this blade was forged by another people in another age!

Now the two giants leaped again to the attack and like double strokes of lightning their weapons crashed. Wulfhere's shield fell from his arm in two pieces as the Atlantean's sword sheared clear through it, and Kull staggered as the Northman's ax, driven with all the force of his great body, descended on the golden circlet about his head. That blow should have sheared through the gold like butter to split the skull beneath, but the ax rebounded, showing a great notch in the edge. The next instant the Northman was overwhelmed by a whirlwind of steel – a storm of strokes delivered with such swiftness and power that he was borne back as on the crest of a wave, unable to launch an attack of his own. With all his tried skill he sought to parry the singing steel with his ax. But he could only avert his doom for a few seconds; could only for an instant turn the whistling blade that hewed off bits of his mail, so close fell the blows. One of the horns flew from his helmet; then the ax-head itself fell away, and the same blow that severed the handle, bit through the viking's helmet into the scalp beneath. Wulfhere was dashed to his knees, a trickle of blood starting down his face.

Kull checked his second stroke, and tossing his sword to Cormac, faced the dazed Northman weaponless. The Atlantean's eyes were blazing with ferocious joy and he roared something in a strange tongue. Wulfhere gathered his legs under him and bounded up, snarling like a wolf, a dagger flashing into his hand. The watching horde gave tongue in a yell that ripped the skies as the two bodies clashed. Kull's clutching hand missed the Northman's wrist but the desperately lunging dagger snapped on the Atlantean's mail, and dropping the useless hilt, Wulfhere locked his arms about his foe in a bear-like grip that would have crushed the ribs of a lesser man. Kull grinned tigerishly and returned the grapple, and for a moment the two swayed on their feet. Slowly the black-haired warrior bent his foe backward until it seemed his spine would snap. With a howl that had nothing of the human in it, Wulfhere clawed frantically at Kull's face, trying to tear out his eyes, then turned his head and snapped his fang-like teeth into the Atlantean's arm. A yell went up as a trickle of blood started: "He bleeds! He bleeds! He is no ghost, after all, but a mortal man!"

Angered, Kull shifted his grip, shoving the frothing Wulfhere away from him, and smote him terrifically under the ear with his right hand. The viking landed on his back a dozen feet away. Then, howling like a wild man, he

leaped up with a stone in his hand and flung it. Only Kull's incredible quickness saved his face; as it was, the rough edge of the missile tore his cheek and inflamed him to madness. With a lion-like roar he bounded upon his foe, enveloped him in an irresistible blast of sheer fury, whirled him high above his head as if he were a child and cast him a dozen feet away. Wulfhere pitched on his head and lay still – broken and dead.

Dazed silence reigned for an instant; then from the Gaels went up a thundering roar, and the Britons and Picts took it up, howling like wolves, until the echoes of the shouts and the clangor of sword on shield reached the ears of the marching legionaries, miles to the south.

"Men of the gray North," shouted Bran, "will you hold by your oath *now?*"

The fierce souls of the Northmen were in their eyes as their spokesman answered. Primitive, superstitious, steeped in tribal lore of fighting gods and mythical heroes, they did not doubt that the black-haired fighting man was some supernatural being sent by the fierce gods of battle.

"Aye! Such a man as this we have never seen! Dead man, ghost or devil, we will follow him, whether the trail lead to Rome or Valhalla!"

Kull understood the meaning, if not the words. Taking his sword from Cormac with a word of thanks, he turned to the waiting Northmen and silently held the blade toward them high above his head, in both hands, before he returned it to its scabbard. Without understanding, they appreciated the action. Blood-stained and disheveled, he was an impressive picture of stately, magnificent barbarism.

"Come," said Bran, touching the Atlantean's arm; "a host is marching on us and we have much to do. There is scant time to arrange our forces before they will be upon us. Come to the top of yonder slope."

There the Pict pointed. They were looking down into a valley which ran north and south, widening from a narrow gorge in the north until it debouched upon a plain to the south. The whole valley was less than a mile in length.

"Up this valley will our foes come," said the Pict, "because they have wagons loaded with supplies and on all sides of this vale the ground is too rough for such travel. Here we plan an ambush."

"I would have thought you would have had your men lying in wait long before now," said Kull. "What of the scouts the enemy is sure to send out?"

“The savages I lead would never have waited in ambush so long,” said Bran with a touch of bitterness. “I could not post them until I was sure of the Northmen. Even so I had not dared to post them ere now – even yet they may take panic from the drifting of a cloud or the blowing of a leaf, and scatter like birds before a cold wind. King Kull – the fate of the Pictish nation is at stake. I am called king of the Picts, but my rule as yet is but a hollow mockery. The hills are full of wild clans who refuse to fight for me. Of the thousand bowmen now at my command, more than half are of my own clan.

“Some eighteen hundred Romans are marching against us. It is not a real invasion, but much hinges upon it. It is the beginning of an attempt to extend their boundaries. They plan to build a fortress a day’s march to the north of this valley. If they do, they will build other forts, drawing bands of steel about the heart of the free people. If I win this battle and wipe out this army, I will win a double victory. Then the tribes will flock to me and the next invasion will meet a solid wall of resistance. If I lose, the clans will scatter, fleeing into the north until they can no longer flee, fighting as separate clans rather than as one strong nation.

“I have a thousand archers, five hundred horsemen, fifty chariots with their drivers and swordsmen – one hundred fifty men in all – and, thanks to you, three hundred heavily armed Northern pirates. How would you arrange your battle lines?”

“Well,” said Kull, “I would have barricaded the north end of the valley – no! That would suggest a trap. But I would block it with a band of desperate men, like those you have given me to lead. Three hundred could hold the gorge for a time against any number. Then, when the enemy was engaged with these men to the narrow part of the valley, I would have my archers shoot down into them until their ranks are broken, from both sides of the vale. Then, having my horsemen concealed behind one ridge and my chariots behind the other, I would charge with both simultaneously and sweep the foe into a red ruin.”

Bran’s eyes glowed. “Exactly, king of Valusia. Such was my exact plan — ”

“But what of the scouts?”

“My warriors are like panthers; they hide under the noses of the Romans. Those who ride into the valley will see only what we wish them to see. Those who ride over the ridge will not come back to report. An arrow is swift and silent.

“You see that the pivot of the whole thing depends on the men that hold the gorge. They must be men who can fight on foot and resist the charges of the heavy legionaries long enough for the trap to close. Outside these Northmen I had no such force of men. My naked warriors with their short swords could never stand such a charge for an instant. Nor is the armor of the Celts made for such work; moreover, they are not foot-fighters, and I need them elsewhere.

“So you see why I had such desperate need of the Northmen. Now will you stand in the gorge with them and hold back the Romans until I can spring the trap? Remember, most of you will die.”

Kull smiled. “I have taken chances all my life, though Tu, chief councillor, would say my life belongs to Valusia and I have no right to so risk it — ” His voice trailed off and a strange look flitted across his face. “By Valka,” said he, laughing uncertainly, “sometimes I forget this is a dream! All seems so real. But it is – of course it is! Well, then, if I die I will but awaken as I have done in times past. Lead on, king of Caledon!”

Cormac, going to his warriors, wondered. Surely it was all a hoax; yet – he heard the arguments of the warriors all about him as they armed themselves and prepared to take their posts. The black-haired king was Neid himself, the Celtic war-god; he was an antediluvian king brought out of the past by Gonar; he was a mythical fighting man out of Valhalla. He was no man at all but a ghost! No, he was mortal, for he had bled. But the gods themselves bled, though they did not die. So the controversies raged. At least, thought Cormac, if it was all a hoax to inspire the warriors with the feeling of supernatural aid, it had succeeded. The belief that Kull was more than a mortal man had fired Celt, Pict and viking alike into a sort of inspired madness. And Cormac asked himself – what did he himself believe? This man was surely one from some far land – yet in his every look and action there was a vague hint of a greater difference than mere distance of space – a hint of alien Time, of misty abysses and gigantic gulfs of eons lying between the black-haired stranger and the men with whom he walked and talked. Clouds of bewilderment mazed Cormac’s brain and he laughed in whimsical self-mockery.

III

“And the two wild peoples of the north

Stood fronting in the gloam,

And heard and knew each in his mind

A third great sound upon the wind,

The living walls that hedge mankind,

The walking walls of Rome.”

Chesterton

The sun slanted westward. Silence lay like an invisible mist over the valley. Cormac gathered the reins in his hand and glanced up at the ridges on both sides. The waving heather which grew rank on those steep slopes gave no evidence of the hundreds of savage warriors who lurked there. Here in the narrow gorge which widened gradually southward was the only sign of life. Between the steep walls three hundred Northmen were massed solidly in their wedge-shaped shield-wall, blocking the pass. At the tip, like the point of a spear, stood the man who called himself Kull, king of Valusia. He wore no helmet, only the great, strangely worked head-band of hard gold, but he bore on his left arm the great shield borne by the dead Rognar; and in his right hand he held the heavy iron mace wielded by the sea-king. The vikings eyed him in wonder and savage admiration. They could not understand his language, or he theirs. But no further orders were necessary. At Bran’s directions they had bunched themselves in the gorge, and their only order was – hold the pass!

Bran Mak Morn stood just in front of Kull. So they faced each other, he whose kingdom was yet unborn, and he whose kingdom had been lost in the mists of Time for unguessed ages. Kings of darkness, thought Cormac, nameless kings of the night, whose realms are gulfs and shadows.

The hand of the Pictish king went out. “King Kull, you are more than king – you are a man. Both of us may fall within the next hour – but if we both live, ask what you will of me.”

Kull smiled, returning the firm grip. “You too are a man after my own heart, king of the shadows. Surely you are more than a figment of my sleeping imagination. Mayhap we will meet in waking life some day.”

Bran shook his head in puzzlement, swung into the saddle and rode away, climbing the eastern slope and vanishing over the ridge. Cormac hesitated: “Strange man, are you in truth of flesh and blood, or are you a ghost?”

“When we dream, we are all flesh and blood – so long as we are dreaming,” Kull answered. “This is the strangest nightmare I have ever known – but you,

who will soon fade into sheer nothingness as I awaken, seem as real to me *now*, as Brule, or Kananu, or Tu, or Kelkor."

Cormac shook his head as Bran had done, and with a last salute, which Kull returned with barbaric stateliness, he turned and trotted away. At the top of the western ridge he paused. Away to the south a light cloud of dust rose and the head of the marching column was in sight. Already he believed he could feel the earth vibrate slightly to the measured tread of a thousand mailed feet beating in perfect unison. He dismounted, and one of his chieftains, Domnail, took his steed and led it down the slope away from the valley, where trees grew thickly. Only an occasional vague movement among them gave evidence of the five hundred men who stood there, each at his horse's head with a ready hand to check a chance nicker.

Oh, thought Cormac, the gods themselves made this valley for Bran's ambush! The floor of the valley was treeless and the inner slopes were bare save for the waist-high heather. But at the foot of each ridge on the side facing away from the vale, where the soil long washed from the rocky slopes had accumulated, there grew enough trees to hide five hundred horsemen or fifty chariots.

At the northern end of the valley stood Kull and his three hundred vikings, in open view, flanked on each side by fifty Pictish bowmen. Hidden on the western side of the western ridge were the Gaels. Along the top of the slopes, concealed in the tall heather, lay a hundred Picts with their shafts on string. The rest of the Picts were hidden on the eastern slopes beyond which lay the Britons with their chariots in full readiness. Neither they nor the Gaels to the west could see what went on in the vale, but signals had been arranged.

Now the long column was entering the wide mouth of the valley and their scouts, light-armed men on swift horses, were spreading out between the slopes. They galloped almost within bowshot of the silent host that blocked the pass, then halted. Some whirled and raced back to the main force, while the others deployed and cantered up the slopes, seeking to see what lay beyond. This was the crucial moment. If they got any hint of the ambush, all was lost. Cormac, shrinking down into the heather, marveled at the ability of the Picts to efface themselves from view so completely. He saw a horseman pass within three feet of where he knew a bowman lay, yet the Roman saw nothing.

The scouts topped the ridges, gazed about; then most of them turned and trotted back down the slopes. Cormac wondered at their desultory manner of

scouting. He had never fought Romans before, knew nothing of their arrogant self-confidence, of their incredible shrewdness in some ways, their incredible stupidity in others. These men were over-confident; a feeling radiating from their officers. It had been years since a force of Caledonians had stood before the legions. And most of these men were but newly come to Britain; part of a legion which had been quartered in Egypt. They despised their foes and suspected nothing.

But stay – three riders on the opposite ridge had turned and vanished on the other side. And now one, sitting his steed at the crest of the western ridge, not a hundred yards from where Cormac lay, looked long and narrowly down into the mass of trees at the foot of the slope. Cormac saw suspicion grow on his brown, hawk-like face. He half turned as though to call to his comrades, then instead reined his steed down the slope, leaning forward in his saddle. Cormac's heart pounded. Each moment he expected to see the man wheel and gallop back to raise the alarm. He resisted a mad impulse to leap up and charge the Roman on foot. Surely the man could feel the tenseness in the air – the hundreds of fierce eyes upon him. Now he was half-way down the slope, out of sight of the men in the valley. And now the twang of an unseen bow broke the painful stillness. With a strangled gasp the Roman flung his hands high, and as the steed reared, he pitched headlong, transfixed by a long black arrow that had flashed from the heather. A stocky dwarf sprang out of nowhere, seemingly, and seized the bridle, quieting the snorting horse, and leading it down the slope. At the fall of the Roman, short crooked men rose like a sudden flight of birds from the grass and Cormac saw the flash of a knife. Then with unreal suddenness all had subsided. Slayers and slain were unseen and only the still waving heather marked the grim deed.

The Gael looked back into the valley. The three who had ridden over the eastern ridge had not come back and Cormac knew they never would. Evidently the other scouts had borne word that only a small band of warriors was ready to dispute the passage of the legionaries. Now the head of the column was almost below him and he thrilled at the sight of these men who were doomed, swinging along with their superb arrogance. And the sight of their splendid armor, their hawk-like faces and perfect discipline awed him as much as it is possible for a Gael to be awed.

Twelve hundred men in heavy armor who marched as one so that the ground shook to their tread! Most of them were of middle height, with powerful chests and shoulders and bronzed faces – hard-bitten veterans of a hundred campaigns. Cormac noted their javelins, short keen swords and heavy shields; their gleaming armor and crested helmets, the eagles on the standards. These

were the men beneath whose tread the world had shaken and empires crumbled! Not all were Latins; there were Romanized Britons among them and one century or hundred was composed of huge yellow-haired men – Gauls and Germans, who fought for Rome as fiercely as did the native-born, and hated their wilder kinsmen more savagely.

On each side was a swarm of cavalry, outriders, and the column was flanked by archers and slingers. A number of lumbering wagons carried the supplies of the army. Cormac saw the commander riding in his place – a tall man with a lean, imperious face, evident even at that distance. Marcus Sulius – the Gael knew him by repute.

A deep-throated roar rose from the legionaries as they approached their foes. Evidently they intended to slice their way through and continue without a pause, for the column moved implacably on. Whom the gods destroy they first make mad – Cormac had never heard the phrase but it came to him that the great Sulius was a fool. Roman arrogance! Marcus was used to lashing the cringing peoples of a decadent East; little he guessed of the iron in these western races.

A group of cavalry detached itself and raced into the mouth of the gorge, but it was only a gesture. With loud jeering shouts they wheeled three spears length away and cast their javelins, which rattled harmlessly on the overlapping shields of the silent Northmen. But their leader dared too much; swinging in, he leaned from his saddle and thrust at Kull’s face. The great shield turned the lance and Kull struck back as a snake strikes; the ponderous mace crushed helmet and head like an eggshell, and the very steed went to its knees from the shock of that terrible blow. From the Northmen went up a short fierce roar, and the Picts beside them howled exultantly and loosed their arrows among the retreating horsemen. First blood for the people of the heather! The oncoming Romans shouted vengefully and quickened their pace as the frightened horse raced by, a ghastly travesty of a man, foot caught in the stirrup, trailing beneath the pounding hoofs.

Now the first line of the legionaries, compressed because of the narrowness of the gorge, crashed against the solid wall of shields – crashed and recoiled upon itself. The shield-wall had not shaken an inch. This was the first time the Roman legions had met with that unbreakable formation – that oldest of all Aryan battle-lines – the ancestor of the Spartan regiment – the Theban phalanx – the Macedonian formation – the English square.

Shield crashed on shield and the short Roman sword sought for an opening in

that iron wall. Viking spears bristling in solid ranks above, thrust and reddened; heavy axes chopped down, shearing through iron, flesh and bone. Cormac saw Kull, looming above the stocky Romans in the forefront of the fray, dealing blows like thunderbolts. A burly centurion rushed in, shield held high, stabbing upward. The iron mace crashed terribly, shivering the sword, rending the shield apart, shattering the helmet, crushing the skull down between the shoulders – in a single blow.

The front line of the Romans bent like a steel bar about the wedge, as the legionaries sought to struggle through the gorge on each side and surround their opposers. But the pass was too narrow; crouching close against the steep walls the Picts drove their black arrows in a hail of death. At this range the heavy shafts tore through shield and corselet, transfixing the armored men. The front line of battle rolled back, red and broken, and the Northmen trod their few dead under foot to close the gaps their fall had made. Stretched the full width of their front lay a thin line of shattered forms – the red spray of the tide which had broken upon them in vain.

Cormac had leaped to his feet, waving his arms. Domnail and his men broke cover at the signal and came galloping up the slope, lining the ridge. Cormac mounted the horse brought him and glanced impatiently across the narrow vale. No sign of life appeared on the eastern ridge. Where was Bran – and the Britons?

Down in the valley, the legions, angered at the unexpected opposition of the paltry force in front of them, but not suspicious, were forming in more compact body. The wagons which had halted were lumbering on again and the whole column was once more in motion as if it intended to crash through by sheer weight. With the Gaulish century in the forefront, the legionaries were advancing again in the attack. This time, with the full force of twelve hundred men behind, the charge would batter down the resistance of Kull’s warriors like a heavy ram; would stamp them down, sweep over their red ruins. Cormac’s men trembled in impatience. Suddenly Marcus Sulius turned and gazed westward, where the line of horsemen was etched against the sky. Even at that distance Cormac saw his face pale. The Roman at last realized the metal of the men he faced, and that he had walked into a trap. Surely in that moment there flashed a chaotic picture through his brain – defeat – disgrace – red ruin!

It was too late to retreat – too late to form into a defensive square with the wagons for barricade. There was but one possible way out, and Marcus, crafty general in spite of his recent blunder, took it. Cormac heard his voice cut like

a clarion through the din, and though he did not understand the words, he knew that the Roman was shouting for his men to smite that knot of Northmen like a blast – to hack their way through and out of the trap before it could close!

Now the legionaries, aware of their desperate plight, flung themselves headlong and terribly on their foes. The shield-wall rocked, but it gave not an inch. The wild faces of the Gauls and the hard brown Italian faces glared over locked shields into the blazing eyes of the North. Shields touching, they smote and slew and died in a red storm of slaughter, where crimsoned axes rose and fell and dripping spears broke on notched swords.

Where in God's name was Bran with his chariots? A few minutes more would spell the doom of every man who held that pass. Already they were falling fast, though they locked their ranks closer and held like iron. Those wild men of the North were dying in their tracks; and looming among their golden heads the black lion-mane of Kull shone like a symbol of slaughter, and his reddened mace showered a ghastly rain as it splashed brains and blood like water.

Something snapped in Cormac's brain.

"These men will die while we wait for Bran's signal!" he shouted. "On! Follow me into Hell, sons of Gael!"

A wild roar answered him, and loosing rein he shot down the slope with five hundred yelling riders plunging headlong after him. And even at that moment a storm of arrows swept the valley from either side like a dark cloud and the terrible clamor of the Picts split the skies. And over the eastern ridge, like a sudden burst of rolling thunder on Judgment Day, rushed the war-chariots. Headlong down the slope they roared, foam flying from the horses' distended nostrils, frantic feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground, making naught of the tall heather. In the foremost chariot, with his dark eyes blazing, crouched Bran Mak Morn, and in all of them the naked Britons were screaming and lashing as if possessed by demons. Behind the flying chariots came the Picts, howling like wolves and loosing their arrows as they ran. The heather belched them forth from all sides in a dark wave.

So much Cormac saw in chaotic glimpses during that wild ride down the slopes. A wave of cavalry swept between him and the main line of the column. Three long leaps ahead of his men, the Gaelic prince met the spears of the Roman riders. The first lance turned on his buckler, and rising in his stirrups he smote downward, cleaving his man from shoulder to breastbone.

The next Roman flung a javelin that killed Domnail, but at that instant Cormac's steed crashed into his, breast to breast, and the lighter horse rolled headlong under the shock, flinging his rider beneath the pounding hoofs.

Then the whole blast of the Gaelic charge smote the Roman cavalry, shattering it, crashing and rolling it down and under. Over its red ruins Cormac's yelling demons struck the heavy Roman infantry, and the whole line reeled at the shock. Swords and axes flashed up and down and the force of their rush carried them deep into the massed ranks. Here, checked, they swayed and strove. Javelins thrust, swords flashed upward, bringing down horse and rider, and greatly outnumbered, leaguered on every side, the Gaels had perished among their foes, but at that instant, from the other side the crashing chariots smote the Roman ranks. In one long line they struck almost simultaneously, and at the moment of impact the charioteers wheeled their horses side-long and raced parallel down the ranks, shearing men down like the mowing of wheat. Hundreds died on those curving blades in that moment, and leaping from the chariots, screaming like blood-mad wildcats, the British swordsmen flung themselves upon the spears of the legionaries, hacking madly with their two-handed swords. Crouching, the Picts drove their arrows pointblank and then sprang in to slash and thrust. Maddened with the sight of victory, these wild peoples were like wounded tigers, feeling no wounds, and dying on their feet with their last gasp a snarl of fury.

But the battle was not over yet. Dazed, shattered, their formation broken and nearly half their number down already, the Romans fought back with desperate fury. Hemmed in on all sides they slashed and smote singly, or in small clumps, fought back to back, archers, slingers, horsemen and heavy legionaries mingled into a chaotic mass. The confusion was complete, but not the victory. Those bottled in the gorge still hurled themselves upon the red axes that barred their way, while the massed and serried battle thundered behind them. From one side Cormac's Gaels raged and slashed; from the other chariots swept back and forth, retiring and returning like iron whirlwinds. There was no retreat, for the Picts had flung a cordon across the way they had come, and having cut the throats of the camp followers and possessed themselves of the wagons, they sent their shafts in a storm of death into the rear of the shattered column. Those long black arrows pierced armor and bone, nailing men together. Yet the slaughter was not all on one side. Picts died beneath the lightning thrust of javelin and shortsword, Gaels pinned beneath their falling horses were hewed to pieces, and chariots, cut loose from their horses, were deluged with the blood of the charioteers.

And at the narrow head of the valley still the battle surged and eddied. Great gods – thought Cormac, glancing between lightning-like blows – do these men still hold the gorge? Aye! They held it! A tenth of their original number, dying on their feet, they still held back the frantic charges of the dwindling legionaries.

Over all the field went up the roar and the clash of arms, and birds of prey, swift-flying out of the sunset, circled above. Cormac, striving to reach Marcus Sulius through the press, saw the Roman's horse sink under him, and the rider rise alone in a waste of foes. He saw the Roman sword flash thrice, dealing a death at each blow; then from the thickest of the fray bounded a terrible figure. It was Bran Mak Morn, stained from head to foot. He cast away his broken sword as he ran, drawing a dirk. The Roman struck, but the Pictish king was under the thrust, and gripping the sword-wrist, he drove the dirk again and again through the gleaming armor.

A mighty roar went up as Marcus died, and Cormac, with a shout, rallied the remnants of his force about him and, striking in the spurs, burst through the shattered lines and rode full speed for the other end of the valley.

But as he approached he saw that he was too late. As they had lived, so had they died, those fierce sea-wolves, with their faces to the foe and their broken weapons red in their hands. In a grim and silent band they lay, even in death preserving some of the shield-wall formation. Among them, in front of them and all about them lay high-heaped the bodies of those who had sought to break them, in vain. *They had not given back a foot!* To the last man, they had died in their tracks. Nor were there any left to stride over their torn shapes; those Romans who had escaped the viking axes had been struck down by the shafts of the Picts and swords of the Gaels from behind.

Yet this part of the battle was not over. High up on the steep western slope Cormac saw the ending of that drama. A group of Gauls in the armor of Rome pressed upon a single man – a black-haired giant on whose head gleamed a golden crown. There was iron in these men, as well as in the man who had held them to their fate. They were doomed – their comrades were being slaughtered behind them – but before their turn came they would at least have the life of the black-haired chief who had led the golden-haired men of the North.

Pressing upon him from three sides they had forced him slowly back up the steep gorge wall, and the crumpled bodies that stretched along his retreat showed how fiercely every foot of the way had been contested. Here on this

steep it was task enough to keep one's footing alone; yet these men at once climbed and fought. Kull's shield and the huge mace were gone, and the great sword in his right hand was dyed crimson. His mail, wrought with a forgotten art, now hung in shreds, and blood streamed from a hundred wounds on limbs, head and body. But his eyes still blazed with the battle-joy and his wearied arm still drove the mighty blade in strokes of death.

But Cormac saw that the end would come before they could reach him. Now at the very crest of the steep, a hedge of points menaced the strange king's life, and even his iron strength was ebbing. Now he split the skull of a huge warrior and the back-stroke shore through the neck-cords of another; reeling under a very rain of swords he struck again and his victim dropped at his feet, cleft to the breast-bone. Then, even as a dozen swords rose above the staggering Atlantean for the death stroke, a strange thing happened. The sun was sinking into the western sea; all the heather swam red like an ocean of blood. Etched in the dying sun, as he had first appeared, Kull stood, and then, like a mist lifting, a mighty vista opened behind the reeling king. Cormac's astounded eyes caught a fleeting gigantic glimpse of other climes and spheres – as if mirrored in summer clouds he saw, instead of the heather hills stretching away to the sea, a dim and mighty land of blue mountains and gleaming quiet lakes – the golden, purple and sapphirean spires and towering walls of a mighty city such as the earth has not known for many a drifting age.

Then like the fading of a mirage it was gone, but the Gauls on the high slope had dropped their weapons and stared like men dazed – *For the man called Kull had vanished and there was no trace of his going!*

As in a daze Cormac turned his steed and rode back across the trampled field. His horse's hoofs splashed in lakes of blood and clanged against the helmets of dead men. Across the valley the shout of victory was thundering. Yet all seemed shadowy and strange. A shape was striding across the torn corpses and Cormac was dully aware that it was Bran. The Gael swung from his horse and fronted the king. Bran was weaponless and gory; blood trickled from gashes on brow, breast and limb; what armor he had worn was clean hacked away and a cut had shorn half-way through his iron crown. But the red jewel still gleamed unblemished like a star of slaughter.

"It is in my mind to slay you," said the Gael heavily and like a man speaking in a daze, "for the blood of brave men is on your head. Had you given the signal to charge sooner, some would have lived."

Bran folded his arms; his eyes were haunted. “Strike if you will; I am sick of slaughter. It is a cold mead, this kinging it. A king must gamble with men’s lives and naked swords. The lives of all my people were at stake; I sacrificed the Northmen – yes; and my heart is sore within me, for they were men! But had I given the order when you would have desired, all might have gone awry. The Romans were not yet massed in the narrow mouth of the gorge, and might have had time and space to form their ranks again and beat us off. I waited until the last moment – and the rovers died. A king belongs to his people, and can not let either his own feelings or the lives of men influence him. Now my people are saved; but my heart is cold in my breast.”

Cormac wearily dropped his sword-point to the ground.

“You are a born king of men, Bran,” said the Gaelic prince.

Bran’s eyes roved the field. A mist of blood hovered over all, where the victorious barbarians were looting the dead, while those Romans who had escaped slaughter by throwing down their swords and now stood under guard, looked on with hot smoldering eyes.

“My kingdom – my people – are saved,” said Bran wearily. “They will come from the heather by the thousands and when Rome moves against us again, she will meet a solid nation. But I am weary. What of Kull?”

“My eyes and brain were mazed with battle,” answered Cormac. “I thought to see him vanish like a ghost into the sunset. I will seek his body.”

“Seek not for him,” said Bran. “Out of the sunrise he came – into the sunset he has gone. Out of the mists of the ages he came to us, and back into the mists of the eons has he returned – to his own kingdom.”

Cormac turned away; night was gathering. Gonar stood like a white specter before him.

“To his own kingdom,” echoed the wizard. “Time and Space are naught. Kull has returned to his own kingdom – his own crown – his own age.”

“Then he was a ghost?”

“Did you not feel the grip of his solid hand? Did you not hear his voice – see him eat and drink, laugh and slay and bleed?”

Still Cormac stood like one in a trance.

“Then if it be possible for a man to pass from one age into one yet unborn, or come forth from a century dead and forgotten, whichever you will, with his flesh-and-blood body and his arms – then he is as mortal as he was in his own day. Is Kull dead, then?”

“He died a hundred thousand years ago, as men reckon time,” answered the wizard, “but in his own age. He died not from the swords of the Gauls of this age. Have we not heard in legends how the king of Valusia traveled into a strange, timeless land of the misty future ages, and there fought in a great battle? Why, so he did! A hundred thousand years ago, or today!

“And a hundred thousand years ago – or a moment agone! – Kull, king of Valusia, roused himself on the silken couch in his secret chamber and laughing, spoke to the first Gonar, saying: ‘Ha, wizard, I have in truth dreamed strangely, for I went into a far clime and a far time in my visions, and fought for the king of a strange shadow-people!’ And the great sorcerer smiled and pointed silently at the red, notched sword, and the torn mail and the many wounds that the king carried. And Kull, fully woken from his ‘vision’ and feeling the sting and the weakness of these yet bleeding wounds, fell silent and mazed, and all life and time and space seemed like a dream of ghosts to him, and he wondered thereat all the rest of his life. For the wisdom of the Eternities is denied even unto princes and Kull could no more understand what Gonar told him than you can understand my words.”

“And then Kull lived despite his many wounds,” said Cormac, “and has returned to the mists of silence and the centuries. Well – he thought us a dream; we thought him a ghost. And sure, life is but a web spun of ghosts and dreams and illusion, and it is in my mind that the kingdom which has this day been born of swords and slaughter in this howling valley is a thing no more solid than the foam of the bright sea.”

A Song of the Race

A Song of the Race

High on his throne sat Bran Mak Morn

When the sun-god sank and the west was red;

He beckoned a girl with his drinking horn,

And, “Sing me a song of the race,” he said.

Her eyes were as dark as the seas of night,
Her lips were as red as the setting sun,
As, a dusky rose in the fading light,
She let her fingers dreamily run

Over the golden-whispered strings,
Seeking the soul of her ancient lyre;
Bran sate still on the throne of kings,
Bronze face limned in the sunset’s fire.

“First of the race of men,” she sang,
“Far from an unknown land we came,
From the rim of the world where mountains hang
And the seas burn red with the sunset flame.

“First and the last of the race are we,
Gone is the old world’s gilt and pride,
Mu is a myth of the western sea,
Through halls of Atlantis the white sharks glide.”

An image of bronze, the king sate still,

Javelins of crimson shot the west,
She brushed the strings and a murmured thrill
Swept up the chords to the highest crest.

“Hear ye the tale that the ancients tell,
Promised of yore by the god of the moon,
Hurled on the shore a deep sea shell,
Carved on the surface a mystic rune:

“‘As ye were first in the mystic past
Out of the fogs of the dim of Time,
So shall the men of your race be last
When the world shall crumble,’ so ran the rhyme.

“‘A man of your race, on peaks that clash,
Shall gaze on the reeling world below;
To billowing smoke shall he see it crash,
A floating fog of the winds that blow.

“‘Star-dust falling for aye through space.
Whirling about in the winds that spin;
Ye that were first, be the last-most race,
For one of your men shall be the last of men.’”

Into the silence her voice trailed off,

Yet still it echoed across the dusk,

Over the heather the night-wind soft

Bore the scent of the forest’s musk.

Red lips lifted, and dark eyes dreamed,

Bats came wheeling on stealthy wings;

But the moon rose gold and the far stars gleamed,

And the king still sate on the throne of kings.

Worms of the Earth

Worms of the Earth

“Strike in the nails, soldiers, and let our guest see the reality of our good Roman justice!”

The speaker wrapped his purple cloak closer about his powerful frame and settled back into his official chair, much as he might have settled back in his seat at the Circus Maximus to enjoy the clash of gladiatorial swords. Realization of power colored his every move. Whetted pride was necessary to Roman satisfaction, and Titus Sulla was justly proud; for he was military governor of Eboracum and answerable only to the emperor of Rome. He was a strongly built man of medium height, with the hawk-like features of the pure-bred Roman. Now a mocking smile curved his full lips, increasing the arrogance of his haughty aspect. Distinctly military in appearance, he wore the golden-scaled corselet and chased breastplate of his rank, with the short stabbing sword at his belt, and he held on his knee the silvered helmet with its plumed crest. Behind him stood a clump of impassive soldiers with shield and spear – blond titans from the Rhineland.

Before him was taking place the scene which apparently gave him so much real gratification – a scene common enough wherever stretched the far-flung boundaries of Rome. A rude cross lay flat upon the barren earth and on it was bound a man – half naked, wild of aspect with his corded limbs, glaring eyes and shock of tangled hair. His executioners were Roman soldiers, and with heavy hammers they prepared to pin the victim's hands and feet to the wood with iron spikes.

Only a small group of men watched this ghastly scene, in the dread place of execution beyond the city walls: the governor and his watchful guards; a few young Roman officers; the man to whom Sulla had referred as "guest" and who stood like a bronze image, unspeaking. Beside the gleaming splendor of the Roman, the quiet garb of this man seemed drab, almost somber.

He was dark, but he did not resemble the Latins around him. There was about him none of the warm, almost Oriental sensuality of the Mediterranean which colored their features. The blond barbarians behind Sulla's chair were less unlike the man in facial outline than were the Romans. Not his were the full curving red lips, nor the rich waving locks suggestive of the Greek. Nor was his dark complexion the rich olive of the south; rather it was the bleak darkness of the north. The whole aspect of the man vaguely suggested the shadowed mists, the gloom, the cold and the icy winds of the naked northern lands. Even his black eyes were savagely cold, like black fires burning through fathoms of ice.

His height was only medium but there was something about him which transcended mere physical bulk – a certain fierce innate vitality, comparable only to that of a wolf or a panther. In every line of his supple, compact body, as well as in his coarse straight hair and thin lips, this was evident – in the hawk-like set of the head on the corded neck, in the broad square shoulders, in the deep chest, the lean loins, the narrow feet. Built with the savage economy of a panther, he was an image of dynamic potentialities, pent in with iron self-control.

At his feet crouched one like him in complexion – but there the resemblance ended. This other was a stunted giant, with gnarly limbs, thick body, a low sloping brow and an expression of dull ferocity, now clearly mixed with fear. If the man on the cross resembled, in a tribal way, the man Titus Sulla called guest, he far more resembled the stunted crouching giant.

"Well, Partha Mac Othna," said the governor with studied effrontery, "when you return to your tribe, you will have a tale to tell of the justice of Rome,

who rules the south."

"I will have a tale," answered the other in a voice which betrayed no emotion, just as his dark face, schooled to immobility, showed no evidence of the maelstrom in his soul.

"Justice to all under the rule of Rome," said Sulla. "Pax Romana! Reward for virtue, punishment for wrong!" He laughed inwardly at his own black hypocrisy, then continued: "You see, emissary of Pictland, how swiftly Rome punishes the transgressor."

"I see," answered the Pict in a voice which strongly-curbed anger made deep with menace, "that the subject of a foreign king is dealt with as though he were a Roman slave."

"He has been tried and condemned in an unbiased court," retorted Sulla.

"Aye! and the accuser was a Roman, the witnesses Roman, the judge Roman! He committed murder? In a moment of fury he struck down a Roman merchant who cheated, tricked and robbed him, and to injury added insult – aye, and a blow! Is his king but a dog, that Rome crucifies his subjects at will, condemned by Roman courts? Is his king too weak or foolish to do justice, were he informed and formal charges brought against the offender?"

"Well," said Sulla cynically, "you may inform Bran Mak Morn yourself. Rome, my friend, makes no account of her actions to barbarian kings. When savages come among us, let them act with discretion or suffer the consequences."

The Pict shut his iron jaws with a snap that told Sulla further badgering would elicit no reply. The Roman made a gesture to the executioners. One of them seized a spike and placing it against the thick wrist of the victim, smote heavily. The iron point sank deep through the flesh, crunching against the bones. The lips of the man on the cross writhed, though no moan escaped him. As a trapped wolf fights against his cage, the bound victim instinctively wrenched and struggled. The veins swelled in his temples, sweat beaded his low forehead, the muscles in arms and legs writhed and knotted. The hammers fell in inexorable strokes, driving the cruel points deeper and deeper, through wrists and ankles; blood flowed in a black river over the hands that held the spikes, staining the wood of the cross, and the splintering of bones was distinctly heard. Yet the sufferer made no outcry, though his blackened lips writhed back until the gums were visible, and his shaggy head jerked involuntarily from side to side.

The man called Partha Mac Othna stood like an iron image, eyes burning from an inscrutable face, his whole body hard as iron from the tension of his control. At his feet crouched his misshapen servant, hiding his face from the grim sight, his arms locked about his master's knees. Those arms gripped like steel and under his breath the fellow mumbled ceaselessly as if in invocation.

The last stroke fell; the cords were cut from arm and leg, so that the man would hang supported by the nails alone. He had ceased his struggling that only twisted the spikes in his agonizing wounds. His bright black eyes, unglazed, had not left the face of the man called Partha Mac Othna; in them lingered a desperate shadow of hope. Now the soldiers lifted the cross and set the end of it in the hole prepared, stamped the dirt about it to hold it erect. The Pict hung in midair, suspended by the nails in his flesh, but still no sound escaped his lips. His eyes still hung on the somber face of the emissary, but the shadow of hope was fading.

"He'll live for days!" said Sulla cheerfully. "These Picts are harder than cats to kill! I'll keep a guard of ten soldiers watching night and day to see that no one takes him down before he dies. Ho, there, Valerius, in honor of our esteemed neighbor, King Bran Mak Morn, give him a cup of wine!"

With a laugh the young officer came forward, holding a brimming wine-cup, and rising on his toes, lifted it to the parched lips of the sufferer. In the black eyes flared a red wave of unquenchable hatred; writhing his head aside to avoid even touching the cup, he spat full into the young Roman's eyes. With a curse Valerius dashed the cup to the ground, and before any could halt him, wrenched out his sword and sheathed it in the man's body.

Sulla rose with an imperious exclamation of anger; the man called Partha Mac Othna had started violently, but he bit his lip and said nothing. Valerius seemed somewhat surprized at himself, as he sullenly cleansed his sword. The act had been instinctive, following the insult to Roman pride, the one thing unbearable.

"Give up your sword, young sir!" exclaimed Sulla. "Centurion Publius, place him under arrest. A few days in a cell with stale bread and water will teach you to curb your patrician pride, in matters dealing with the will of the empire. What, you young fool, do you not realize that you could not have made the dog a more kindly gift? Who would not rather desire a quick death on the sword than the slow agony on the cross? Take him away. And you, centurion, see that guards remain at the cross so that the body is not cut down until the ravens pick bare the bones. Partha Mac Othna, I go to a banquet at

the house of Demetrius – will you not accompany me?”

The emissary shook his head, his eyes fixed on the limp form which sagged on the black-stained cross. He made no reply. Sulla smiled sardonically, then rose and strode away, followed by his secretary who bore the gilded chair ceremoniously, and by the stolid soldiers, with whom walked Valerius, head sunken.

The man called Partha Mac Othna flung a wide fold of his cloak about his shoulder, halted a moment to gaze at the grim cross with its burden, darkly etched against the crimson sky, where the clouds of night were gathering. Then he stalked away, followed by his silent servant.

II

In an inner chamber of Eboracum, the man called Partha Mac Othna paced tigerishly to and fro. His sandalled feet made no sound on the marble tiles.

“Grom!” he turned to the gnarled servant, “well I know why you held my knees so tightly – why you muttered aid of the Moon-Woman – you feared I would lose my self-control and make a mad attempt to succor that poor wretch. By the gods, I believe that was what the dog Roman wished – his iron-cased watch-dogs watched me narrowly, I know, and his baiting was harder to bear than ordinarily.

“Gods black and white, dark and light!” he shook his clenched fists above his head in the black gust of his passion. “That I should stand by and see a man of mine butchered on a Roman cross – without justice and with no more trial than that farce! Black gods of R’lyeh, even you would I invoke to the ruin and destruction of those butchers! I swear by the Nameless Ones, men shall die howling for that deed, and Rome shall cry out as a woman in the dark who treads upon an adder!”

“He knew you, master,” said Grom.

The other dropped his head and covered his eyes with a gesture of savage pain.

“His eyes will haunt me when I lie dying. Aye, he knew me, and almost until the last, I read in his eyes the hope that I might aid him. Gods and devils, is Rome to butcher my people beneath my very eyes? Then I am not king but dog!”

“Not so loud, in the name of all the gods!” exclaimed Grom in affright. “Did these Romans suspect you were Bran Mak Morn, they would nail you on a cross beside that other.”

“They will know it ere long,” grimly answered the king. “Too long I have lingered here in the guise of an emissary, spying upon mine enemies. They have thought to play with me, these Romans, masking their contempt and scorn only under polished satire. Rome is courteous to barbarian ambassadors, they give us fine houses to live in, offer us slaves, pander to our lusts with women and gold and wine and games, but all the while they laugh at us; their very courtesy is an insult, and sometimes – as today – their contempt discards all veneer. Bah! I’ve seen through their baitings – have remained imperturbably serene and swallowed their studied insults. But this – by the fiends of Hell, this is beyond human endurance! My people look to me; if I fail them – if I fail even one – even the lowest of my people, who will aid them? To whom shall they turn? By the gods, I’ll answer the gibes of these Roman dogs with black shaft and trenchant steel!”

“And the chief with the plumes?” Grom meant the governor and his gutturals thrummed with the blood-lust. “He dies?” He flicked out a length of steel.

Bran scowled. “Easier said than done. He dies – but how may I reach him? By day his German guards keep at his back; by night they stand at door and window. He has many enemies, Romans as well as barbarians. Many a Briton would gladly slit his throat.”

Grom seized Bran’s garment, stammering as fierce eagerness broke the bonds of his inarticulate nature.

“Let me go, master! My life is worth nothing. I will cut him down in the midst of his warriors!”

Bran smiled fiercely and clapped his hand on the stunted giant’s shoulder with a force that would have felled a lesser man.

“Nay, old war-dog, I have too much need of thee! You shall not throw your life away uselessly. Sulla would read the intent in your eyes, besides, and the javelins of his Teutons would be through you ere you could reach him. Not by the dagger in the dark will we strike this Roman, not by the venom in the cup nor the shaft from the ambush.”

The king turned and paced the floor a moment, his head bent in thought. Slowly his eyes grew murky with a thought so fearful he did not speak it

aloud to the waiting warrior.

“I have become somewhat familiar with the maze of Roman politics during my stay in this accursed waste of mud and marble,” said he. “During a war on the Wall, Titus Sulla, as governor of this province, is supposed to hasten thither with his centuries. But this Sulla does not do; he is no coward, but the bravest avoid certain things – to each man, however bold, his own particular fear. So he sends in his place Caius Camillus, who in times of peace patrols the fens of the west, lest the Britons break over the border. And Sulla takes his place in the Tower of Trajan. Ha!”

He whirled and gripped Grom with steely fingers.

“Grom, take the red stallion and ride north! Let no grass grow under the stallion’s hoofs! Ride to Cormac na Connacht and tell him to sweep the frontier with sword and torch! Let his wild Gaels feast their fill of slaughter. After a time I will be with him. But for a time I have affairs in the west.”

Grom’s black eyes gleamed and he made a passionate gesture with his crooked hand – an instinctive move of savagery.

Bran drew a heavy bronze seal from beneath his tunic.

“This is my safe-conduct as an emissary to Roman courts,” he said grimly. “It will open all gates between this house and Baal-dor. If any official questions you too closely – here!”

Lifting the lid of an iron-bound chest, Bran took out a small, heavy leather bag which he gave into the hands of the warrior.

“When all keys fail at a gate,” said he, “try a golden key. Go now!”

There were no ceremonious farewells between the barbarian king and his barbarian vassal. Grom flung up his arm in a gesture of salute; then turning, he hurried out.

Bran stepped to a barred window and gazed out into the moonlit streets.

“Wait until the moon sets,” he muttered grimly. “Then I’ll take the road to – Hell! But before I go I have a debt to pay.”

The stealthy clink of a hoof on the flags reached him.

“With the safe-conduct and gold, not even Rome can hold a Pictish reaver,” muttered the king. “Now I’ll sleep until the moon sets.”

With a snarl at the marble frieze-work and fluted columns, as symbols of Rome, he flung himself down on a couch, from which he had long since impatiently torn the cushions and silk stuffs, as too soft for his hard body. Hate and the black passion of vengeance seethed in him, yet he went instantly to sleep. The first lesson he had learned in his bitter hard life was to snatch sleep any time he could, like a wolf that snatches sleep on the hunting trail. Generally his slumber was as light and dreamless as a panther’s, but tonight it was otherwise.

He sank into fleecy gray fathoms of slumber and in a timeless, misty realm of shadows he met the tall, lean, white-bearded figure of old Gonar, the priest of the Moon, high counsellor to the king. And Bran stood aghast, for Gonar’s face was white as driven snow and he shook as with ague. Well might Bran stand appalled, for in all the years of his life he had never before seen Gonar the Wise show any sign of fear.

“What now, old one?” asked the king. “Goes all well in Baal-dor?”

“All is well in Baal-dor where my body lies sleeping,” answered old Gonar. “Across the void I have come to battle with you for your soul. King, are you mad, this thought you have thought in your brain?”

“Gonar,” answered Bran somberly, “this day I stood still and watched a man of mine die on the cross of Rome. What his name or his rank, I do not know. I do not care. He might have been a faithful unknown warrior of mine, he might have been an outlaw. I only know that he was mine; the first scents he knew were the scents of the heather; the first light he saw was the sunrise on the Pictish hills. He belonged to me, not to Rome. If punishment was just, then none but me should have dealt it. If he were to be tried, none but me should have been his judge. The same blood flowed in our veins; the same fire maddened our brains; in infancy we listened to the same old tales, and in youth we sang the same old songs. He was bound to my heart-strings, as every man and every woman and every child of Pictland is bound. It was mine to protect him; now it is mine to avenge him.”

“But in the name of the gods, Bran,” expostulated the wizard, “take your vengeance in another way! Return to the heather – mass your warriors – join with Cormac and his Gaels, and spread a sea of blood and flame the length of the great Wall!”

“All that I will do,” grimly answered Bran. “But now – *now* – I will have a vengeance such as no Roman ever dreamed of! Ha, what do they know of the mysteries of this ancient isle, which sheltered strange life long before Rome rose from the marshes of the Tiber?”

“Bran, there are weapons too foul to use, even against Rome!”

Bran barked short and sharp as a jackal.

“Ha! There are no weapons I would not use against Rome! My back is at the wall. By the blood of the fiends, has Rome fought me fair? Bah! I am a barbarian king with a wolfskin mantle and an iron crown, fighting with my handful of bows and broken pikes against the queen of the world. What have I? The heather hills, the wattle huts, the spears of my shock-headed tribesmen! And I fight Rome – with her armored legions, her broad fertile plains and rich seas – her mountains and her rivers and her gleaming cities – her wealth, her steel, her gold, her mastery and her wrath. By steel and fire I will fight her – and by subtlety and treachery – by the thorn in the foot, the adder in the path, the venom in the cup, the dagger in the dark; aye,” his voice sank somberly, “and by the worms of the earth!”

“But it is madness!” cried Gonar. “You will perish in the attempt you plan – you will go down to Hell and you will not return! What of your people then?”

“If I can not serve them I had better die,” growled the king.

“But you can not even reach the beings you seek,” cried Gonar. “For untold centuries they have dwelt *apart*. There is no door by which you can come to them. Long ago they severed the bonds that bound them to the world we know.”

“Long ago,” answered Bran somberly, “you told me that nothing in the universe was separated from the stream of Life – a saying the truth of which I have often seen evident. No race, no form of life but is close-knit somehow, by some manner, to the rest of Life and the world. Somewhere there is a thin link connecting *those* I seek to the world I know. Somewhere there is a Door. And somewhere among the bleak fens of the west I will find it.”

Stark horror flooded Gonar’s eyes and he gave back crying, “Wo! Wo! Wo! to Pictdom! Wo to the unborn kingdom! Wo, black wo to the sons of men! Wo, wo, wo, wo!”

Bran awoke to a shadowed room and the starlight on the window-bars. The

moon had sunk from sight though its glow was still faint above the house tops. Memory of his dream shook him and he swore beneath his breath.

Rising, he flung off cloak and mantle, donning a light shirt of black mesh-mail, and girding on sword and dirk. Going again to the iron-bound chest he lifted several compact bags and emptied the clinking contents into the leathern pouch at his girdle. Then wrapping his wide cloak about him, he silently left the house. No servants there were to spy on him – he had impatiently refused the offer of slaves which it was Rome's policy to furnish her barbarian emissaries. Gnarled Grom had attended to all Bran's simple needs.

The stables fronted on the courtyard. A moment's groping in the dark and he placed his hand over a great stallion's nose, checking the nicker of recognition. Working without a light he swiftly bridled and saddled the great brute, and went through the courtyard into a shadowy side-street, leading him. The moon was setting, the border of floating shadows widening along the western wall. Silence lay on the marble palaces and mud hovels of Eboracum under the cold stars.

Bran touched the pouch at his girdle, which was heavy with minted gold that bore the stamp of Rome. He had come to Eboracum posing as an emissary of Pictdom, to act the spy. But being a barbarian, he had not been able to play his part in aloof formality and sedate dignity. He retained a crowded memory of wild feasts where wine flowed in fountains; of white-bosomed Roman women, who, sated with civilized lovers, looked with something more than favor on a virile barbarian; of gladiatorial games; and of other games where dice clicked and spun and tall stacks of gold changed hands. He had drunk deeply and gambled recklessly, after the manner of barbarians, and he had had a remarkable run of luck, due possibly to the indifference with which he won or lost. Gold to the Pict was so much dust, flowing through his fingers. In his land there was no need of it. But he had learned its power in the boundaries of civilization.

Almost under the shadow of the northwestern wall he saw ahead of him loom the great watch-tower which was connected with and reared above the outer wall. One corner of the castle-like fortress, farthest from the wall, served as a dungeon. Bran left his horse standing in a dark alley, with the reins hanging on the ground, and stole like a prowling wolf into the shadows of the fortress.

The young officer Valerius was awakened from a light, unquiet sleep by a stealthy sound at the barred window. He sat up, cursing softly under his breath

as the faint starlight which etched the window-bars fell across the bare stone floor and reminded him of his disgrace. Well, in a few days, he ruminated, he'd be well out of it; Sulla would not be too harsh on a man with such high connections; then let any man or woman gibe at him! Damn that insolent Pict! But wait, he thought suddenly, remembering: what of the sound which had roused him?

"Hsssst!" it was a voice from the window.

Why so much secrecy? It could hardly be a foe – yet, why should it be a friend? Valerius rose and crossed his cell, coming close to the window. Outside all was dim in the starlight and he made out but a shadowy form close to the window.

"Who are you?" he leaned close against the bars, straining his eyes into the gloom.

His answer was a snarl of wolfish laughter, a long flicker of steel in the starlight. Valerius reeled away from the window and crashed to the floor, clutching his throat, gurgling horribly as he tried to scream. Blood gushed through his fingers, forming about his twitching body a pool that reflected the dim starlight dully and redly.

Outside Bran glided away like a shadow, without pausing to peer into the cell. In another minute the guards would round the corner on their regular routine. Even now he heard the measured tramp of their iron-clad feet. Before they came in sight he had vanished and they clumped stolidly by the cell-windows with no intimation of the corpse that lay on the floor within.

Bran rode to the small gate in the western wall, unchallenged by the sleepy watch. What fear of foreign invasion in Eboracum? – and certain well organized thieves and women-stealers made it profitable for the watchmen not to be too vigilant. But the single guardsman at the western gate – his fellows lay drunk in a near-by brothel – lifted his spear and bawled for Bran to halt and give an account of himself. Silently the Pict reined closer. Masked in the dark cloak, he seemed dim and indistinct to the Roman, who was only aware of the glitter of his cold eyes in the gloom. But Bran held up his hand against the starlight and the soldier caught the gleam of gold; in the other hand he saw a long sheen of steel. The soldier understood, and he did not hesitate between the choice of a golden bribe or a battle to the death with this unknown rider who was apparently a barbarian of some sort. With a grunt he lowered his spear and swung the gate open. Bran rode through, casting a handful of coins to the Roman. They fell about his feet in a golden shower, clinking against the

flags. He bent in greedy haste to retrieve them and Bran Mak Morn rode westward like a flying ghost in the night.

III

Into the dim fens of the west came Bran Mak Morn. A cold wind breathed across the gloomy waste and against the gray sky a few herons flapped heavily. The long reeds and marsh-grass waved in broken undulations and out across the desolation of the wastes a few still meres reflected the dull light. Here and there rose curiously regular hillocks above the general levels, and gaunt against the somber sky Bran saw a marching line of upright monoliths – menhirs, reared by what nameless hands?

A faint blue line to the west lay the foothills that beyond the horizon grew to the wild mountains of Wales where dwelt still wild Celtic tribes – fierce blue-eyed men that knew not the yoke of Rome. A row of well-garrisoned watch-towers held them in check. Even now, far away across the moors, Bran glimpsed the unassailable keep men called the Tower of Trajan.

These barren wastes seemed the dreary accomplishment of desolation, yet human life was not utterly lacking. Bran met the silent men of the fen, reticent, dark of eye and hair, speaking a strange mixed tongue whose long-blended elements had forgotten their pristine separate sources. Bran recognized a certain kinship in these people to himself, but he looked on them with the scorn of a pure-blooded patrician for men of mixed strains.

Not that the common people of Caledonia were altogether pure-blooded; they got their stocky bodies and massive limbs from a primitive Teutonic race which had found its way into the northern tip of the isle even before the Celtic conquest of Britain was completed, and had been absorbed by the Picts. But the chiefs of Bran’s folk had kept their blood from foreign taint since the beginnings of time, and he himself was a pure-bred Pict of the Old Race. But these fenmen, overrun repeatedly by British, Gaelic and Roman conquerors, had assimilated blood of each, and in the process almost forgotten their original language and lineage.

For Bran came of a race that was very old, which had spread over western Europe in one vast Dark Empire, before the coming of the Aryans, when the ancestors of the Celts, the Hellenes and the Germans were one primal people, before the days of tribal splitting-off and westward drift.

Only in Caledonia, Bran brooded, had his people resisted the flood of Aryan conquest. He had heard of a Pictish people called Basques, who in the crags

of the Pyrenees called themselves an unconquered race; but he knew that they had paid tribute for centuries to the ancestors of the Gaels, before these Celtic conquerors abandoned their mountain-realm and set sail for Ireland. Only the Picts of Caledonia had remained free, and they had been scattered into small feuding tribes – he was the first acknowledged king in five hundred years – the beginning of a new dynasty – no, a revival of an ancient dynasty under a new name. In the very teeth of Rome he dreamed his dreams of empire.

He wandered through the fens, seeking a Door. Of his quest he said nothing to the dark-eyed fenmen. They told him news that drifted from mouth to mouth – a tale of war in the north, the skirl of war-pipes along the winding Wall, of gathering-fires in the heather, of flame and smoke and rapine and the glutting of Gaelic swords in the crimson sea of slaughter. The eagles of the legions were moving northward and the ancient road resounded to the measured tramp of the iron-clad feet. And Bran, in the fens of the west, laughed, well pleased.

In Eboracum Titus Sulla gave secret word to seek out the Pictish emissary with the Gaelic name who had been under suspicion, and who had vanished the night young Valerius was found dead in his cell with his throat ripped out. Sulla felt that this sudden bursting flame of war on the Wall was connected closely with his execution of a condemned Pictish criminal, and he set his spy system to work, though he felt sure that Partha Mac Othna was by this time far beyond his reach. He prepared to march from Eboracum, but he did not accompany the considerable force of legionaries which he sent north. Sulla was a brave man, but each man has his own dread, and Sulla's was Cormac na Connacht, the black-haired prince of the Gaels, who had sworn to cut out the governor's heart and eat it raw. So Sulla rode with his ever-present bodyguard, westward, where lay the Tower of Trajan with its war-like commander, Caius Camillus, who enjoyed nothing more than taking his superior's place when the red waves of war washed at the foot of the Wall. Devious politics, but the legate of Rome seldom visited this far isle, and what of his wealth and intrigues, Titus Sulla was the highest power in Britain.

And Bran, knowing all this, patiently waited his coming, in the deserted hut in which he had taken up his abode.

One gray evening he strode on foot across the moors, a stark figure, blackly etched against the dim crimson fire of the sunset. He felt the incredible antiquity of the slumbering land, as he walked like the last man on the day after the end of the world. Yet at last he saw a token of human life – a drab hut of wattle and mud, set in the reedy breast of the fen.

A woman greeted him from the open door and Bran's somber eyes narrowed with a dark suspicion. The woman was not old, yet the evil wisdom of ages was in her eyes; her garments were ragged and scanty, her black locks tangled and unkempt, lending her an aspect of wildness well in keeping with her grim surroundings. Her red lips laughed but there was no mirth in her laughter, only a hint of mockery, and under the lips her teeth showed sharp and pointed like fangs.

"Enter, master," said she, "if you do not fear to share the roof of the witch-woman of Dagon-moor!"

Bran entered silently and sat him down on a broken bench while the woman busied herself with the scanty meal cooking over an open fire on the squalid hearth. He studied her lithe, almost serpentine motions, the ears which were almost pointed, the yellow eyes which slanted curiously.

"What do you seek in the fens, my lord?" she asked, turning toward him with a supple twist of her whole body.

"I seek a Door," he answered, chin resting on his fist. "I have a song to sing to the worms of the earth!"

She started upright, a jar falling from her hands to shatter on the hearth.

"This is an ill saying, even spoken in chance," she stammered.

"I speak not by chance but by intent," he answered.

She shook her head. "I know not what you mean."

"Well you know," he returned. "Aye, you know well! My race is very old – they reigned in Britain before the nations of the Celts and the Hellenes were born out of the womb of peoples. But my people were not first in Britain. By the mottles on your skin, by the slanting of your eyes, by the taint in your veins, I speak with full knowledge and meaning."

Awhile she stood silent, her lips smiling but her face inscrutable.

"Man, are you mad?" she asked, "that in your madness you come seeking that from which strong men fled screaming in old times?"

"I seek a vengeance," he answered, "that can be accomplished only by Them I seek."

She shook her head.

“You have listened to a bird singing; you have dreamed empty dreams.”

“I have heard a viper hiss,” he growled, “and I do not dream. Enough of this weaving of words. I came seeking a link between two worlds; I have found it.”

“I need lie to you no more, man of the North,” answered the woman. “They you seek still dwell beneath the sleeping hills. They have drawn *apart*, farther and farther from the world you know.”

“But they still steal forth in the night to grip women straying on the moors,” said he, his gaze on her slanted eyes. She laughed wickedly.

“What would you of me?”

“That you bring me to Them.”

She flung back her head with a scornful laugh. His left hand locked like iron in the breast of her scanty garment and his right closed on his hilt. She laughed in his face.

“Strike and be damned, my northern wolf! Do you think that such life as mine is so sweet that I would cling to it as a babe to the breast?”

His hand fell away.

“You are right. Threats are foolish. I will buy your aid.”

“How?” the laughing voice hummed with mockery.

Bran opened his pouch and poured into his cupped palm a stream of gold.

“More wealth than the men of the fen ever dreamed of.”

Again she laughed. “What is this rusty metal to me? Save it for some white-breasted Roman woman who will play the traitor for you!”

“Name me a price!” he urged. “The head of an enemy — ”

“By the blood in my veins, with its heritage of ancient hate, who is mine enemy but thee?” she laughed and springing, struck cat-like. But her dagger splintered on the mail beneath his cloak and he flung her off with a loathing

flirt of his wrist which tossed her sprawling across her grass-strewn bunk. Lying there she laughed up at him.

“I will name you a price, then, my wolf, and it may be in days to come you will curse the armor that broke Atla’s dagger!” She rose and came close to him, her disquietingly long hands fastened fiercely into his cloak. “I will tell you, Black Bran, king of Caledon! Oh, I knew you when you came into my hut with your black hair and your cold eyes! I will lead you to the doors of Hell if you wish – and the price shall be the kisses of a king!

“What of my blasted and bitter life, I, whom mortal men loathe and fear? I have not known the love of men, the clasp of a strong arm, the sting of human kisses, I, Atla, the were-woman of the moors! What have I known but the lone winds of the fens, the dreary fire of cold sunsets, the whispering of the marsh grasses? – the faces that blink up at me in the waters of the meres, the foot-pad of night-things in the gloom, the glimmer of red eyes, the grisly murmur of nameless beings in the night!

“I am half-human, at least! Have I not known sorrow and yearning and crying wistfulness, and the drear ache of loneliness? Give to me, king – give me your fierce kisses and your hurtful barbarian’s embrace. Then in the long drear years to come I shall not utterly eat out my heart in vain envy of the white-bosomed women of men; for I shall have a memory few of them can boast – the kisses of a king! One night of love, oh king, and I will guide you to the gates of Hell!”

Bran eyed her somberly; he reached forth and gripped her arm in his iron fingers. An involuntary shudder shook him at the feel of her sleek skin. He nodded slowly and drawing her close to him, forced his head down to meet her lifted lips.

IV

The cold gray mists of dawn wrapped King Bran like a clammy cloak. He turned to the woman whose slanted eyes gleamed in the gray gloom.

“Make good your part of the contract,” he said roughly. “I sought a link between worlds, and in you I found it. I seek the one thing sacred to Them. It shall be the Key opening the Door that lies unseen between me and Them. Tell me how I can reach it.”

“I will,” the red lips smiled terribly. “Go to the mound men call Dagon’s Barrow. Draw aside the stone that blocks the entrance and go under the dome

of the mound. The floor of the chamber is made of seven great stones, six grouped about the seventh. Lift out the center stone – and you will see!"

"Will I find the Black Stone?" he asked.

"Dagon's Barrow is the Door to the Black Stone," she answered, "if you dare follow the Road."

"Will the symbol be well guarded?" He unconsciously loosened his blade in its sheath. The red lips curled mockingly.

"If you meet any on the Road you will die as no mortal man has died for long centuries. The Stone is not guarded, as men guard their treasures. Why should They guard what man has never sought? Perhaps They will be near, perhaps not. It is a chance you must take, if you wish the Stone. Beware, king of Pictdom! Remember it was your folk who, so long ago, cut the thread that bound Them to human life. They were almost human then – they overspread the land and knew the sunlight. Now they have drawn *apart*. They know not the sunlight and they shun the light of the moon. Even the starlight they hate. Far, far apart have they drawn, who might have been men in time, but for the spears of your ancestors."

The sky was overcast with misty gray, through which the sun shone coldly yellow when Bran came to Dagon's Barrow, a round hillock overgrown with rank grass of a curious fungoid appearance. On the eastern side of the mound showed the entrance of a crudely built stone tunnel which evidently penetrated the barrow. One great stone blocked the entrance to the tomb. Bran laid hold of the sharp edges and exerted all his strength. It held fast. He drew his sword and worked the blade between the blocking stone and the sill. Using the sword as a lever, he worked carefully, and managed to loosen the great stone and wrench it out. A foul charnel-house scent flowed out of the aperture and the dim sunlight seemed less to illuminate the cavern-like opening than to be fouled by the rank darkness which clung there.

Sword in hand, ready for he knew not what, Bran groped his way into the tunnel, which was long and narrow, built up of heavy joined stones, and was too low for him to stand erect. Either his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the gloom, or the darkness was, after all, somewhat lightened by the sunlight filtering in through the entrance. At any rate he came into a round low chamber and was able to make out its general dome-like outline. Here, no doubt, in old times, had reposed the bones of him for whom the stones of the tomb had been joined and the earth heaped high above them; but now of those bones no vestige remained on the stone floor. And bending close and straining

his eyes, Bran made out the strange, startlingly regular pattern of that floor: six well-cut slabs clustered about a seventh, six-sided stone.

He drove his sword-point into a crack and pried carefully. The edge of the central stone tilted slightly upward. A little work and he lifted it out and leaned it against the curving wall. Straining his eyes downward he saw only the gaping blackness of a dark well, with small, worn steps that led downward and out of sight. He did not hesitate. Though the skin between his shoulders crawled curiously, he swung himself into the abyss and felt the clinging blackness swallow him.

Groping downward, he felt his feet slip and stumble on steps too small for human feet. With one hand pressed hard against the side of the well he steadied himself, fearing a fall into unknown and unlighted depths. The steps were cut into solid rock, yet they were greatly worn away. The farther he progressed, the less like steps they became, mere bumps of worn stone. Then the direction of the shaft changed sharply. It still led down, but at a shallow slant down which he could walk, elbows braced against the hollowed sides, head bent low beneath the curved roof. The steps had ceased altogether and the stone felt slimy to the touch, like a serpent's lair. What beings, Bran wondered, had slithered up and down this slanting shaft, for how many centuries?

The tunnel narrowed until Bran found it rather difficult to shove through. He lay on his back and pushed himself along with his hands, feet first. Still he knew he was sinking deeper and deeper into the very guts of the earth; how far below the surface he was, he dared not contemplate. Then ahead a faint witch-fire gleam tinged the abysmal blackness. He grinned savagely and without mirth. If They he sought came suddenly upon him, how could he fight in that narrow shaft? But he had put the thought of personal fear behind him when he began this hellish quest. He crawled on, thoughtless of all else but his goal.

And he came at last into a vast space where he could stand upright. He could not see the roof of the place, but he got an impression of dizzying vastness. The blackness pressed in on all sides and behind him he could see the entrance to the shaft from which he had just emerged – a black well in the darkness. But in front of him a strange grisly radiance glowed about a grim altar built of human skulls. The source of that light he could not determine, but on the altar lay a sullen night-black object – the Black Stone!

Bran wasted no time in giving thanks that the guardians of the grim relic were

nowhere near. He caught up the Stone, and gripping it under his left arm, crawled into the shaft. When a man turns his back on peril its clammy menace looms more grisly than when he advances upon it. So Bran, crawling back up the nighted shaft with his grisly prize, felt the darkness turn on him and slink behind him, grinning with dripping fangs. Clammy sweat beaded his flesh and he hastened to the best of his ability, ears strained for some stealthy sound to betray that fell shapes were at his heels. Strong shudders shook him, despite himself, and the short hair on his neck prickled as if a cold wind blew at his back.

When he reached the first of the tiny steps he felt as if he had attained to the outer boundaries of the mortal world. Up them he went, stumbling and slipping, and with a deep gasp of relief, came out into the tomb, whose spectral grayness seemed like the blaze of noon in comparison to the stygian depths he had just traversed. He replaced the central stone and strode into the light of the outer day, and never was the cold yellow light of the sun more grateful, as it dispelled the shadows of black-winged nightmares of fear and madness that seemed to have ridden him up out of the black deeps. He shoved the great blocking stone back into place, and picking up the cloak he had left at the mouth of the tomb, he wrapped it about the Black Stone and hurried away, a strong revulsion and loathing shaking his soul and lending wings to his strides.

A gray silence brooded over the land. It was desolate as the blind side of the moon, yet Bran felt the potentialities of life – under his feet, in the brown earth – sleeping, but how soon to waken, and in what horrific fashion?

He came through the tall masking reeds to the still deep men called Dagon’s Mere. No slightest ripple ruffled the cold blue water to give evidence of the grisly monster legend said dwelt beneath. Bran closely scanned the breathless landscape. He saw no hint of life, human or unhuman. He sought the instincts of his savage soul to know if any unseen eyes fixed their lethal gaze upon him, and found no response. He was alone as if he were the last man alive on earth.

Swiftly he unwrapped the Black Stone, and as it lay in his hands like a solid sullen block of darkness, he did not seek to learn the secret of its material nor scan the cryptic characters carved thereon. Weighing it in his hands and calculating the distance, he flung it far out, so that it fell almost exactly in the middle of the lake. A sullen splash and the waters closed over it. There was a moment of shimmering flashes on the bosom of the lake; then the blue surface stretched placid and unrippled again.

V

The were-woman turned swiftly as Bran approached her door. Her slant eyes widened.

“You! And alive! And sane!”

“I have been into Hell and I have returned,” he growled. “What is more, I have that which I sought.”

“The Black Stone?” she cried. “You really dared steal it? Where is it?”

“No matter; but last night my stallion screamed in his stall and I heard something crunch beneath his thundering hoofs which was not the wall of the stable – and there was blood on his hoofs when I came to see, and blood on the floor of the stall. And I have heard stealthy sounds in the night, and noises beneath my dirt floor, as if worms burrowed deep in the earth. They know I have stolen their Stone. Have you betrayed me?”

She shook her head.

“I keep your secret; they do not need my word to know you. The farther they have retreated from the world of men, the greater have grown their powers in other uncanny ways. Some dawn your hut will stand empty and if men dare investigate they will find nothing – except crumbling bits of earth on the dirt floor.”

Bran smiled terribly.

“I have not planned and toiled thus far to fall prey to the talons of vermin. If They strike me down in the night, They will never know what became of their idol – or whatever it be to Them. I would speak with Them.”

“Dare you come with me and meet them in the night?” she asked.

“Thunder of all gods!” he snarled. “Who are you to ask me if I dare? Lead me to Them and let me bargain for a vengeance this night. The hour of retribution draws nigh. This day I saw silvered helmets and bright shields gleam across the fens – the new commander has arrived at the Tower of Trajan and Caius Camillus has marched to the Wall.”

That night the king went across the dark desolation of the moors with the silent were-woman. The night was thick and still as if the land lay in ancient

slumber. The stars blinked vaguely, mere points of red struggling through the unbreathing gloom. Their gleam was dimmer than the glitter in the eyes of the woman who glided beside the king. Strange thoughts shook Bran, vague, titanic, primeval. Tonight ancestral linkings with these slumbering fens stirred in his soul and troubled him with the fantasmal, eon-veiled shapes of monstrous dreams. The vast age of his race was borne upon him; where now he walked an outlaw and an alien, dark-eyed kings in whose mold he was cast had reigned in old times. The Celtic and Roman invaders were as strangers to this ancient isle beside his people. Yet his race likewise had been invaders, and there was an older race than his – a race whose beginnings lay lost and hidden back beyond the dark oblivion of antiquity.

Ahead of them loomed a low range of hills, which formed the easternmost extremity of those straying chains which far away climbed at last to the mountains of Wales. The woman led the way up what might have been a sheep-path, and halted before a wide black gaping cave.

“A door to those you seek, oh king!” her laughter rang hateful in the gloom. “Dare ye enter?”

His fingers closed in her tangled locks and he shook her viciously.

“Ask me but once more if I dare,” he grated, “and your head and shoulders part company! Lead on.”

Her laughter was like sweet deadly venom. They passed into the cave and Bran struck flint and steel. The flicker of the tinder showed him a wide dusty cavern, on the roof of which hung clusters of bats. Lighting a torch, he lifted it and scanned the shadowy recesses, seeing nothing but dust and emptiness.

“Where are They?” he growled.

She beckoned him to the back of the cave and leaned against the rough wall, as if casually. But the king’s keen eyes caught the motion of her hand pressing hard against a projecting ledge. He recoiled as a round black well gaped suddenly at his feet. Again her laughter slashed him like a keen silver knife. He held the torch to the opening and again saw small worn steps leading down.

“They do not need those steps,” said Atla. “Once they did, before your people drove them into the darkness. But you will need them.”

She thrust the torch into a niche above the well; it shed a faint red light into

the darkness below. She gestured into the well and Bran loosened his sword and stepped into the shaft. As he went down into the mystery of the darkness, the light was blotted out above him, and he thought for an instant Atla had covered the opening again. Then he realized that she was descending after him.

The descent was not a long one. Abruptly Bran felt his feet on a solid floor. Atla swung down beside him and stood in the dim circle of light that drifted down the shaft. Bran could not see the limits of the place into which he had come.

“Many caves in these hills,” said Atla, her voice sounding small and strangely brittle in the vastness, “are but doors to greater caves which lie beneath, even as a man’s words and deeds are but small indications of the dark caverns of murky thought lying behind and beneath.”

And now Bran was aware of movement in the gloom. The darkness was filled with stealthy noises not like those made by any human foot. Abruptly sparks began to flash and float in the blackness, like flickering fireflies. Closer they came until they girdled him in a wide half-moon. And beyond the ring gleamed other sparks, a solid sea of them, fading away in the gloom until the farthest were mere tiny pin-points of light. And Bran knew they were the slanted eyes of the beings who had come upon him in such numbers that his brain reeled at the contemplation – and at the vastness of the cavern.

Now that he faced his ancient foes, Bran knew no fear. He felt the waves of terrible menace emanating from them, the grisly hate, the inhuman threat to body, mind and soul. More than a member of a less ancient race, he realized the horror of his position, but he did not fear, though he confronted the ultimate Horror of the dreams and legends of his race. His blood raced fiercely but it was with the hot excitement of the hazard, not the drive of terror.

“They know you have the Stone, oh king,” said Atla, and though he knew she feared, though he felt her physical efforts to control her trembling limbs, there was no quiver of fright in her voice. “You are in deadly peril; they know your breed of old – oh, they remember the days when their ancestors were men! I can not save you; both of us will die as no human has died for ten centuries. Speak to them, if you will; they can understand your speech, though you may not understand theirs. But it will avail not – you are human – and a Pict.”

Bran laughed and the closing ring of fire shrank back at the savagery in his laughter. Drawing his sword with a soul-chilling rasp of steel, he set his back

against what he hoped was a solid stone wall. Facing the glittering eyes with his sword gripped in his right hand and his dirk in his left, he laughed as a blood-hungry wolf snarls.

“Aye,” he growled, “I am a Pict, a son of those warriors who drove your brutish ancestors before them like chaff before the storm! – who flooded the land with your blood and heaped high your skulls for a sacrifice to the Moon-Woman! You who fled of old before my race, dare ye now snarl at your master? Roll on me like a flood, now, if ye dare! Before your viper fangs drink my life I will reap your multitudes like ripened barley – of your severed heads will I build a tower and of your mangled corpses will I rear up a wall! Dogs of the dark, vermin of Hell, worms of the earth, rush in and try my steel! When Death finds me in this dark cavern, your living will howl for the scores of your dead and your Black Stone will be lost to you for ever – for only I know where it is hidden and not all the tortures of all the Hells can wring the secret from my lips!”

Then followed a tense silence; Bran faced the fire-lit darkness, tensed like a wolf at bay, waiting the charge; at his side the woman cowered, her eyes ablaze. Then from the silent ring that hovered beyond the dim torchlight rose a vague abhorrent murmur. Bran, prepared as he was for anything, started. Gods, was *that* the speech of creatures which had once been called men?

Atla straightened, listening intently. From her lips came the same hideous soft sibilances, and Bran, though he had already known the grisly secret of her being, knew that never again could he touch her save with soul-shaken loathing.

She turned to him, a strange smile curving her red lips dimly in the ghostly light.

“They fear you, oh king! By the black secrets of R’lyeh, who are you that Hell itself quails before you? Not your steel, but the stark ferocity of your soul has driven unused fear into their strange minds. They will buy back the Black Stone at any price.”

“Good,” Bran sheathed his weapons. “They shall promise not to molest you because of your aid of me. And,” his voice hummed like the purr of a hunting tiger, “They shall deliver into my hands Titus Sulla, governor of Eboracum, now commanding the Tower of Trajan. This They can do – how, I know not. But I know that in the old days, when my people warred with these Children of the Night, babes disappeared from guarded huts and none saw the stealers come or go. Do They understand?”

Again rose the low frightful sounds and Bran, who feared not their wrath, shuddered at their voices.

“They understand,” said Atla. “Bring the Black Stone to Dagon’s Ring tomorrow night when the earth is veiled with the blackness that foreruns the dawn. Lay the Stone on the altar. There They will bring Titus Sulla to you. Trust Them; They have not interfered in human affairs for many centuries, but They will keep their word.”

Bran nodded and turning, climbed up the stair with Atla close behind him. At the top he turned and looked down once more. As far as he could see floated a glittering ocean of slanted yellow eyes upturned. But the owners of those eyes kept carefully beyond the dim circle of torchlight and of their bodies he could see nothing. Their low hissing speech floated up to him and he shuddered as his imagination visualized, not a throng of biped creatures, but a swarming, swaying myriad of serpents, gazing up at him with their glittering unwinking eyes.

He swung into the upper cave and Atla thrust the blocking stone back in place. It fitted into the entrance of the well with uncanny precision; Bran was unable to discern any crack in the apparently solid floor of the cavern. Atla made a motion to extinguish the torch, but the king stayed her.

“Keep it so until we are out of the cave,” he grunted. “We might tread on an adder in the dark.”

Atla’s sweetly hateful laughter rose maddeningly in the flickering gloom.

VI

It was not long before sunset when Bran came again to the reed-grown marge of Dagon’s Mere. Casting cloak and sword-belt on the ground, he stripped himself of his short leathern breeches. Then gripping his naked dirk in his teeth, he went into the water with the smooth ease of a diving seal. Swimming strongly, he gained the center of the small lake, and turning, drove himself downward.

The mere was deeper than he had thought. It seemed he would never reach the bottom, and when he did, his groping hands failed to find what he sought. A roaring in his ears warned him and he swam to the surface.

Gulping deep of the refreshing air, he dived again, and again his quest was

fruitless. A third time he sought the depth, and this time his groping hands met a familiar object in the silt of the bottom. Grasping it, he swam up to the surface.

The Stone was not particularly bulky, but it was heavy. He swam leisurely, and suddenly was aware of a curious stir in the waters about him which was not caused by his own exertions. Thrusting his face below the surface, he tried to pierce the blue depths with his eyes and thought to see a dim gigantic shadow hovering there.

He swam faster, not frightened, but wary. His feet struck the shallows and he waded up on the shelving shore. Looking back he saw the waters swirl and subside. He shook his head, swearing. He had discounted the ancient legend which made Dagon's Mere the lair of a nameless water-monster, but now he had a feeling as if his escape had been narrow. The time-worn myths of the ancient land were taking form and coming to life before his eyes. What primeval shape lurked below the surface of that treacherous mere, Bran could not guess, but he felt that the fenmen had good reason for shunning the spot, after all.

Bran donned his garments, mounted the black stallion and rode across the fens in the desolate crimson of the sunset's afterglow, with the Black Stone wrapped in his cloak. He rode, not to his hut, but to the west, in the direction of the Tower of Trajan and the Ring of Dagon. As he covered the miles that lay between, the red stars winked out. Midnight passed him in the moonless night and still Bran rode on. His heart was hot for his meeting with Titus Sulla. Atla had gloated over the anticipation of watching the Roman writhe under torture, but no such thought was in the Pict's mind. The governor should have his chance with weapons – with Bran's own sword he should face the Pictish king's dirk, and live or die according to his prowess. And though Sulla was famed throughout the provinces as a swordsman, Bran felt no doubt as to the outcome.

Dagon's Ring lay some distance from the Tower – a sullen circle of tall gaunt stones planted upright, with a rough-hewn stone altar in the center. The Romans looked on these menhirs with aversion; they thought the Druids had reared them; but the Celts supposed Bran's people, the Picts, had planted them – and Bran well knew what hands reared those grim monoliths in lost ages, though for what reasons, he but dimly guessed.

The king did not ride straight to the Ring. He was consumed with curiosity as to how his grim allies intended carrying out their promise. That They could

snatch Titus Sulla from the very midst of his men, he felt sure, and he believed he knew how They would do it. He felt the gnawings of a strange misgiving, as if he had tampered with powers of unknown breadth and depth, and had loosed forces which he could not control. Each time he remembered that reptilian murmur, those slanted eyes of the night before, a cold breath passed over him. They had been abhorrent enough when his people drove Them into the caverns under the hills, ages ago; what had long centuries of retrogression made of them? In their nighted, subterranean life, had They retained any of the attributes of humanity at all?

Some instinct prompted him to ride toward the Tower. He knew he was near; but for the thick darkness he could have plainly seen its stark outline tusking the horizon. Even now he should be able to make it out dimly. An obscure, shuddersome premonition shook him and he spurred the stallion into swift canter.

And suddenly Bran staggered in his saddle as from a physical impact, so stunning was the surprize of what met his gaze. The impregnable Tower of Trajan was no more! Bran's astounded gaze rested on a gigantic pile of ruins – of shattered stone and crumbled granite, from which jutted the jagged and splintered ends of broken beams. At one corner of the tumbled heap one tower rose out of the waste of crumpled masonry, and it leaned drunkenly as if its foundations had been half cut away.

Bran dismounted and walked forward, dazed by bewilderment. The moat was filled in places by fallen stones and broken pieces of mortared wall. He crossed over and came among the ruins. Where, he knew, only a few hours before the flags had resounded to the martial tramp of iron-clad feet, and the walls had echoed to the clang of shields and the blast of the loud-throated trumpets, a horrific silence reigned.

Almost under Bran's feet, a broken shape writhed and groaned. The king bent down to the legionary who lay in a sticky red pool of his own blood. A single glance showed the Pict that the man, horribly crushed and shattered, was dying.

Lifting the bloody head, Bran placed his flask to the pulped lips and the Roman instinctively drank deep, gulping through splintered teeth. In the dim starlight Bran saw his glazed eyes roll.

"The walls fell," muttered the dying man. "They crashed down like the skies falling on the day of doom. Ah Jove, the skies rained shards of granite and hailstones of marble!"

“I have felt no earthquake shock,” Bran scowled, puzzled.

“It was no earthquake,” muttered the Roman. “Before last dawn it began, the faint dim scratching and clawing far below the earth. We of the guard heard it – like rats burrowing, or like worms hollowing out the earth. Titus laughed at us, but all day long we heard it. Then at midnight the Tower quivered and seemed to settle – as if the foundations were being dug away — ”

A shudder shook Bran Mak Morn. The worms of the earth! Thousands of vermin digging like moles far below the castle, burrowing away the foundations – gods, the land must be honeycombed with tunnels and caverns – these creatures were even less human than he had thought – what ghastly shapes of darkness had he invoked to his aid?

“What of Titus Sulla?” he asked, again holding the flask to the legionary’s lips; in that moment the dying Roman seemed to him almost like a brother.

“Even as the Tower shuddered we heard a fearful scream from the governor’s chamber,” muttered the soldier. “We rushed there – as we broke down the door we heard his shrieks – they seemed to recede – *into the bowels of the earth!* We rushed in; the chamber was empty. His blood-stained sword lay on the floor; in the stone flags of the floor a black hole gaped. Then – the – towers – reeled – the – roof – broke; – through – a – storm – of – crashing – walls – I – crawled — ”

A strong convulsion shook the broken figure.

“Lay me down, friend,” whispered the Roman. “I die.”

He had ceased to breathe before Bran could comply. The Pict rose, mechanically cleansing his hands. He hastened from the spot, and as he galloped over the darkened fens, the weight of the accursed Black Stone under his cloak was as the weight of a foul nightmare on a mortal breast.

As he approached the Ring, he saw an eery glow within, so that the gaunt stones stood etched like the ribs of a skeleton in which a witch-fire burns. The stallion snorted and reared as Bran tied him to one of the menhirs. Carrying the Stone he strode into the grisly circle and saw Atla standing beside the altar, one hand on her hip, her sinuous body swaying in a serpentine manner. The altar glowed all over with ghastly light and Bran knew some one, probably Atla, had rubbed it with phosphorus from some dank swamp or quagmire.

He strode forward and whipping his cloak from about the Stone, flung the accursed thing on to the altar.

“I have fulfilled my part of the contract,” he growled.

“And They, theirs,” she retorted. “Look! – they come!”

He wheeled, his hand instinctively dropping to his sword. Outside the Ring the great stallion screamed savagely and reared against his tether. The night wind moaned through the waving grass and an abhorrent soft hissing mingled with it. Between the menhirs flowed a dark tide of shadows, unstable and chaotic. The Ring filled with glittering eyes which hovered beyond the dim illusive circle of illumination cast by the phosphorescent altar. Somewhere in the darkness a human voice tittered and gibbered idiotically. Bran stiffened, the shadows of a horror clawing at his soul.

He strained his eyes, trying to make out the shapes of those who ringed him. But he glimpsed only billowing masses of shadow which heaved and writhed and squirmed with almost fluid consistency.

“Let them make good their bargain!” he exclaimed angrily.

“Then see, oh king!” cried Atla in a voice of piercing mockery.

There was a stir, a seething in the writhing shadows, and from the darkness crept, like a four-legged animal, a human shape that fell down and groveled at Bran’s feet and writhed and mowed, and lifting a death’s-head, howled like a dying dog. In the ghastly light, Bran, soul-shaken, saw the blank glassy eyes, the bloodless features, the loose, writhing, froth-covered lips of sheer lunacy – gods, was this Titus Sulla, the proud lord of life and death in Eboracum’s proud city?

Bran bared his sword.

“I had thought to give this stroke in vengeance,” he said somberly. “I give it in mercy – *Vale Caesar!*”

The steel flashed in the eery light and Sulla’s head rolled to the foot of the glowing altar, where it lay staring up at the shadowed sky.

“They harmed him not!” Atla’s hateful laugh slashed the sick silence. “It was what he saw and came to know that broke his brain! Like all his heavy-footed race, he knew nothing of the secrets of this ancient land. This night he has

been dragged through the deepest pits of Hell, where even you might have blenched!"

"Well for the Romans that they know not the secrets of this accursed land!" Bran roared, maddened, "with its monster-haunted meres, its foul witch-women, and its lost caverns and subterranean realms where spawn in the darkness shapes of Hell!"

"Are they more foul than a mortal who seeks their aid?" cried Atla with a shriek of fearful mirth. "Give them their Black Stone!"

A cataclysmic loathing shook Bran's soul with red fury.

"Aye, take your cursed Stone!" he roared, snatching it from the altar and dashing it among the shadows with such savagery that bones snapped under its impact. A hurried babel of grisly tongues rose and the shadows heaved in turmoil. One segment of the mass detached itself for an instant and Bran cried out in fierce revulsion, though he caught only a fleeting glimpse of the thing, had only a brief impression of a broad strangely flattened head, pendulous writhing lips that bared curved pointed fangs, and a hideously misshapen, dwarfish body that seemed *mottled* – all set off by those unwinking reptilian eyes. Gods! – the myths had prepared him for horror in human aspect, horror induced by bestial visage and stunted deformity – but this was the horror of nightmare and the night.

"Go back to Hell and take your idol with you!" he yelled, brandishing his clenched fists to the skies, as the thick shadows receded, flowing back and away from him like the foul waters of some black flood. "Your ancestors were men, though strange and monstrous – but gods, ye have become in ghastly fact what my people called ye in scorn! Worms of the earth, back into your holes and burrows! Ye foul the air and leave on the clean earth the slime of the serpents ye have become! Gonar was right – there are shapes too foul to use even against Rome!"

He sprang from the Ring as a man flees the touch of a coiling snake, and tore the stallion free. At his elbow Atla was shrieking with fearful laughter, all human attributes dropped from her like a cloak in the night.

"King of Pictland!" she cried, "King of fools! Do you blench at so small a thing? Stay and let me show you real fruits of the pits! Ha! ha! ha! Run, fool, run! But you are stained with the taint – you have called them forth and they will remember! And in their own time they will come to you again!"

He yelled a wordless curse and struck her savagely in the mouth with his open hand. She staggered, blood starting from her lips, but her fiendish laughter only rose higher.

Bran leaped into the saddle, wild for the clean heather and the cold blue hills of the north where he could plunge his sword into clean slaughter and his sickened soul into the red maelstrom of battle, and forget the horror which lurked below the fens of the west. He gave the frantic stallion the rein, and rode through the night like a hunted ghost, until the hellish laughter of the howling were-woman died out in the darkness behind.

The Dark Man

The Dark Man

"For this is the night of the drawing of swords,

And the painted tower of the heathen hordes

Leans to our hammers, fires and cords,

Leans a little and falls."

Chesterton

A biting wind drifted the snow as it fell. The surf snarled along the rugged shore and farther out the long leaden combers moaned ceaselessly. Through the gray dawn that was stealing over the coast of Connacht a fisherman came trudging, a man rugged as the land that bore him. His feet were wrapped in rough cured leather; a single garment of deerskin scantily sheltered his body. He wore no other clothing. As he strode stolidly along the shore, as heedless of the bitter cold as if he were the shaggy beast he appeared at first glance, he halted. Another man loomed up out of the veil of falling snow and drifting sea-mist. Turlogh Dubh stood before him.

This man was nearly a head taller than the stocky fisherman, and he had the bearing of a fighting man. No single glance would suffice, but any man or woman whose eyes fell on Turlogh Dubh would look long. Six feet and one inch he stood, and the first impression of slimness faded on closer inspection. He was big but trimly molded; a magnificent sweep of shoulder and depth of

chest. Rangy he was, but compact, combining the strength of a bull with the lithe quickness of a panther. The slightest movement he made showed that steel trap coordination that makes the super-fighter. Turlogh Dubh – Black Turlogh, once of the Clan na O'Brien. *5 And black he was as to hair, and dark of complexion. From under heavy black brows gleamed eyes of a hot volcanic blue. And in his clean-shaven face there was something of the somberness of dark mountains, of the ocean at midnight. Like the fisherman, he was a part of this fierce western land.

On his head he wore a plain vizorless helmet without crest or symbol. From neck to mid-thigh he was protected by a close-fitting shirt of black chain mail. The kilt he wore below his armor and which reached to his knees, was of plain drab material. His legs were wrapped with hard leather that might turn a sword edge, and the shoes on his feet were worn with much traveling.

A broad belt encircled his lean waist, holding a long dirk in a leather sheath. On his left arm he carried a small round shield of hide-covered wood, hard as iron, braced and reinforced with steel, and having a short, heavy spike in the center. An ax hung from his right wrist, and it was to this feature that the fisherman's eyes wandered. The weapon with its three-foot handle and graceful lines looked slim and light when the fisherman mentally compared it to the great axes carried by the Norsemen. Yet scarcely three years had passed, as the fisherman knew, since such axes as these had shattered the northern hosts into red defeat and broken the pagan power forever.

There was individuality about the ax as about its owner. It was not like any other the fisherman had ever seen. Single-edged it was, with a short three-edged spike on the back and another on the top of the head. Like the wielder, it was heavier than it looked. With its slightly curved shaft and the graceful artistry of the blade, it looked the weapon of an expert – swift, lethal, deadly, cobra-like. The head was of finest Irish workmanship, which meant, at that day, the finest in the world. The handle, cut from the heart of a century-old oak, specially fire-hardened and braced with steel, was as unbreakable as an iron bar.

"Who are you?" asked the fisherman with the bluntness of the west.

"Who are you to ask?" answered the other.

The fisherman's eyes roved to the single ornament the warrior wore – a heavy golden armlet on his left arm.

“Clean-shaven and close-cropped in the Norman fashion,” he muttered. “And dark – you’d be Black Turlogh, the outlaw of Clan na O’Brien. You range far; I heard of you last in the Wicklow hills preying off the O’Reillys and the Oastmen alike.”

“A man must eat, outcast or not,” growled the Dalcassian.

The fisherman shrugged his shoulders. A masterless man – it was a hard road. In those days of clans, when a man’s own kin cast him out he became a son of Ishmael with a vengeance. All men’s hands were against him. The fisherman had heard of Turlogh Dubh – a strange, bitter man, a terrible warrior and a crafty strategist, but one whom sudden bursts of strange madness made a marked man even in that land and age of madmen.

“It’s a bitter day,” said the fisherman apropos of nothing.

Turlogh stared somberly at his tangled beard and wild matted hair. “Have you a boat?”

The other nodded toward a small sheltered cove where lay snugly anchored a trim craft built with the skill of a hundred generations of men who had torn their livelihood from the stubborn sea.

“It scarce looks seaworthy,” said Turlogh.

“Seaworthy? You who were born and bred on the western coast should know better. I’ve sailed her alone to Drumcliff Bay and back, and all the devils in the wind ripping at her.”

“You can’t take fish in such a sea.”

“Do ye think it’s only you chiefs that take sport in risking their hides? By the saints, I’ve sailed to Ballinskellings in a storm – and back too – just for the fun of the thing.”

“Good enough,” said Turlogh. “I’ll take your boat.”

“Ye’ll take the devil! What kind of talk is this? If you want to leave Erin, go to Dublin and take ship with your Dane friends.”

A black scowl made Turlogh’s face a mask of menace. “Men have died for less than that.”

“Did you not intrigue with the Danes? – and is that not why your clan drove you out to starve in the heather?”

“The jealousy of a cousin and the spite of a woman,” growled Turlogh. “Lies – all lies. But enough. Have you seen a long serpent beating up from the south in the last few days?”

“Aye – three days ago we sighted a dragon-beaked galley before the scud. But she didn’t put in – faith, the pirates get naught from the western fishers but hard blows.”

“That would be Thorfel the Fair,” muttered Turlogh, swaying his ax by its wrist-strap. “I knew it.”

“There has been a ship-harrying in the south?”

“A band of reavers fell by night on the castle on Kilbaha. There was a sword-quenching – and the pirates took Moira, daughter of Murtagh, a chief of the Dalcassians.”

“I’ve heard of her,” muttered the fisherman. “There’ll be a whetting of swords in the south – a red sea-plowing, eh, my black jewel?”

“Her brother Dermod lies helpless from a sword-cut in the foot. The lands of her clan are harried by the MacMurroughs in the east and the O’Connors from the north. Not many men can be spared from the defense of the tribe, even to seek for Moira – the clan is fighting for its life. All Erin is rocking under the Dalcassian throne since great Brian fell. Even so, Cormac O’Brien has taken ship to hunt down her ravishers – but he follows the trail of a wild goose, for it is thought the raiders were Danes from Coningbeg. Well – we outcasts have ways of knowledge – it was Thorfel the Fair who holds the isle of Slyne, that the Norse call Helni, in the Hebrides. There he has taken her – there I follow him. Lend me your boat.”

“You are mad!” cried the fisherman sharply. “What are you saying? From Connacht to the Hebrides in an open boat? In this weather? I say you are mad.”

“I will essay it,” answered Turlogh absently. “Will you lend me your boat?”

“No.”

“I might slay you and take it,” said Turlogh.

“You might,” returned the fisherman stolidly.

“You crawling swine,” snarled the outlaw in swift passion, “a princess of Erin languishes in grip of a red-bearded reaver of the north and you haggle like a Saxon.”

“Man, I must live!” cried the fisherman as passionately. “Take my boat and I shall starve! Where can I get another like it? It is the cream of its kind!”

Turlogh reached for the armlet on his left arm. “I will pay you. Here is a torc that Brian Boru put on my arm with his own hand before Clontarf. Take it; it would buy a hundred boats. I have starved with it on my arm, but now the need is desperate.”

But the fisherman shook his head, the strange illogic of the Gael burning in his eyes. “No! My hut is no place for a torc that King Brian’s hands have touched. Keep it – and take the boat, in the name of the saints, if it means that much to you.”

“You shall have it back when I return,” promised Turlogh, “and mayhap a golden chain that now decks the bull neck of some northern rover.”

The day was sad and leaden. The wind moaned and the everlasting monotone of the sea was like the sorrow that is born in the heart of man. The fisherman stood on the rocks and watched the frail craft glide and twist serpent-like among the rocks until the blast of the open sea smote it and tossed it like a feather. The wind caught the sail and the slim boat leaped and staggered, then righted herself and raced before the gale, dwindling until it was but a dancing speck in the eyes of the watcher. And then a flurry of snow hid it from his sight.

Turlogh realized something of the madness of his pilgrimage. But he was bred to hardships and peril. Cold and ice and driving sleet that would have frozen a weaker man, only spurred him to greater efforts. He was as hard and supple as a wolf. Among a race of men whose hardiness astounded even the toughest Norseman, Turlogh Dubh stood out alone. At birth he had been tossed into a snow-drift to test his right to survive. His childhood and boyhood had been spent on the mountains, coast and moors of the west. Until manhood he had never worn woven cloth upon his body; a wolf-skin had formed the apparel of this son of a Dalcassian chief. Before his outlawry he could out-tire a horse, running all day long beside it. He had never wearied at swimming. Now, since

the intrigues of jealous clansmen had driven him into the wastelands and the life of the wolf, his ruggedness was such as can not be conceived by a civilized man.

The snow ceased, the weather cleared, the wind held. Turlogh necessarily hugged the coast line, avoiding the reefs against which it seemed again and again that his craft would be dashed. With tiller, sail and oar he worked tirelessly. Not one man out of a thousand of seafarers could have accomplished it, but Turlogh did. He needed no sleep; as he steered he ate from the rude provisions the fisherman had provided him. By the time he sighted Malin Head the weather had calmed wonderfully. There was still a heavy sea, but the gale had slackened to a sharp breeze that sent the little boat skipping along. Days and nights merged into each other; Turlogh drove eastward. Once he put into shore for fresh water and to snatch a few hours' sleep.

As he steered he thought of the fisherman's last words: "Why should you risk your life for a clan that's put a price on your head?"

Turlogh shrugged his shoulders. Blood was thicker than water. The mere fact that his people had booted him out to die like a hunted wolf on the moors did not alter the fact that they *were* his people. Little Moira, daughter of Murtagh na Kilbaha, had nothing to do with it. He remembered her – he had played with her when he was a boy and she a babe – he remembered the deep grayness of her eyes and the burnished sheen of her black hair, the fairness of her skin. Even as a child she had been remarkably beautiful – why, she was only a child now, for he, Turlogh, was young and he was many years her senior. Now she was speeding north to become the unwilling bride of a Norse reaver. Thorfel the Fair – the Handsome – Turlogh swore by gods that knew not the Cross. A red mist waved across his eyes so that the rolling sea swam crimson all about him. An Irish girl a captive in the skalli of a Norse pirate – with a vicious wrench Turlogh turned his bows straight for the open sea. There was a tinge of madness in his eyes.

It is a long slant from Malin Head to Helni straight out across the foaming billows, as Turlogh took it. He was aiming for a small island that lay, with many other small islands, between Mull and the Hebrides. A modern seaman with charts and compass might have difficulty in finding it. Turlogh had neither. He sailed by instinct and through knowledge. He knew these seas as a man knows his house. He had sailed them as a raider and an avenger, and once he had sailed them as a captive lashed to the deck of a Danish dragon ship. And he followed a red trail. Smoke drifting from headlands, floating

pieces of wreckage, charred timbers showed that Thorfel was ravaging as he went. Turlogh growled in savage satisfaction; he was close behind the viking, in spite of the long lead. For Thorfel was burning and pillaging the shores as he went, and Turlogh's course was like an arrow's.

He was still a long way from Helni when he sighted a small island slightly off his course. He knew it of old as one uninhabited, but there he could get fresh water. So he steered for it. The Isle of Swords it was called, no man knew why. And as he neared the beach he saw a sight which he rightly interpreted. Two boats were drawn up on the shelving shore. One was a crude affair, something like the one Turlogh had, but considerably larger. The other was a long low craft – undeniably viking. Both were deserted. Turlogh listened for the clash of arms, the cry of battle, but silence reigned. Fishers, he thought, from the Scotch isles; they had been sighted by some band of rovers on ship or on some other island, and had been pursued in the long rowboat. But it had been a longer chase than they had anticipated, he was sure; else they would not have started out in an open boat. But inflamed with the murder lust, the reavers would have followed their prey across a hundred miles of rough water, in an open boat, if necessary.

Turlogh drew inshore, tossed over the stone that served for anchor and leaped upon the beach, ax ready. Then up the shore a short distance he saw a strange red huddle of forms. A few swift strides brought him face to face with mystery. Fifteen red-bearded Danes lay in their own gore in a rough circle. Not one breathed. Within this circle, mingling with the bodies of their slayers, lay other men, such as Turlogh had never seen. Short of stature they were, and very dark; their staring dead eyes were the blackest Turlogh had ever seen. They were scantily armored, and their stiff hands still gripped broken swords and daggers. Here and there lay arrows that had shattered on the corselets of the Danes, and Turlogh observed with surprize that many of them were tipped with flint.

"This was a grim fight," he muttered. "Aye, this was a rare sword-quenching. Who are these people? In all the isles I have never seen their like before. Seven – is that all? Where are their comrades who helped them slay these Danes?"

No tracks led away from the bloody spot. Turlogh's brow darkened.

"These were all – seven against fifteen – yet the slayers died with the slain. What manner of men are these who slay twice their number of vikings? They are small men – their armor is mean. Yet — "

Another thought struck him. Why did not the strangers scatter and flee, hide themselves in the woods? He believed he knew the answer. There, at the very center of the silent circle, lay a strange thing. A statue it was of some dark substance and it was in the form of a man. Some five feet long – or high – it was, carved in a semblance of life that made Turlogh start. Half over it lay the corpse of an ancient man, hacked almost beyond human semblance. One lean arm was locked about the figure; the other was outstretched, the hand gripping a flint dagger which was sheathed to the hilt in the breast of a Dane. Turlogh noted the fearful wounds that disfigured all the dark men. They had been hard to kill – they had fought until literally hacked to pieces, and dying, they had dealt death to their slayers. So much Turlogh's eyes showed him. In the dead faces of the dark strangers was a terrible desperation. He noted how their dead hands were still locked in the beards of their foes. One lay beneath the body of a huge Dane, and on this Dane Turlogh could see no wound; until he looked closer and saw the dark man's teeth were sunk, beast-like, into the bull throat of the other.

He bent and dragged the figure from among the bodies. The ancient's arm was locked about it, and he was forced to tear it away with all his strength. It was as if, even in death, the old one clung to his treasure; for Turlogh felt that it was for this image that the small dark men had died. They might have scattered and eluded their foes, but that would have meant giving up their image. They chose to die beside it. Turlogh shook his head; his hatred of the Norse, a heritage of wrongs and outrages, was a burning, living thing, almost an obsession, that at times drove him to the point of insanity. There was, in his fierce heart, no room for mercy; the sight of these Danes, lying dead at his feet, filled him with savage satisfaction. Yet he sensed here, in these silent dead men, a passion stronger than his. Here was some driving impulse deeper than his hate. Aye – and older. These little men seemed very ancient to him, not old as individuals are old, but old as a race is old. Even their corpses exuded an intangible aura of the primeval. And the image —

The Gael bent and grasped it, to lift it. He expected to encounter great weight and was astonished. It was no heavier than if it had been made of light wood. He tapped it, and the sound was solid. At first he thought it was of iron; then he decided it was of stone, but such stone as he had never seen; and he felt that no such stone was to be found in the British Isles or anywhere in the world he knew. For like the little dead men it looked *old*. It was as smooth and free from corrosion as if carved yesterday, but for all that, it was a symbol of antiquity, Turlogh knew. It was the figure of a man who much resembled the small dark men who lay about it. But it differed subtly. Turlogh felt somehow that this was the image of a man who had lived long ago, for surely

the unknown sculptor had had a living model. And he had contrived to breathe a touch of life into his work. There was the sweep of the shoulders, the depth of the chest, the powerfully molded arms; the strength of the features was evident. The firm jaw, the regular nose, the high forehead, all indicated a powerful intellect, a high courage, an inflexible will. Surely, thought Turlogh, this man was a king – or a god. Yet he wore no crown; his only garment was a sort of loin-cloth, wrought so cunningly that every wrinkle and fold was carved as in reality.

“This was their god,” mused Turlogh, looking about him. “They fled before the Danes – but died for their god at last. Who are these people? Whence come they? Whither were they bound?”

He stood, leaning on his ax, and a strange tide rose in his soul. A sense of mighty abysses of time and space opened before; of the strange, endless tides of mankind that drift for ever; of the waves of humanity that wax and wane with the waxing and waning of the sea-tides. Life was a door opening upon two black, unknown worlds – and how many races of men with their hopes and fears, their loves and their hates, had passed through that door – on their pilgrimage from the dark to the dark? Turlogh sighed. Deep in his soul stirred the mystic sadness of the Gael.

“You were a king, once, Dark Man,” he said to the silent image. “Mayhap you were a god and reigned over all the world. Your people passed – as mine are passing. Surely you were a king of the Flint People, the race whom my Celtic ancestors destroyed. Well – we have had our day and we, too, are passing. These Danes who lie at your feet – they are the conquerors now. They must have their day – but they too will pass. But you shall go with me, Dark Man, king, god or devil though you be. Aye, for it is in my mind that you will bring me luck, and luck is what I shall need when I sight Helni, Dark Man.”

Turlogh bound the image securely in the bows. Again he set out for his sea-plowing. Now the skies grew gray and the snow fell in driving lances that stung and cut. The waves were gray-grained with ice and the winds bellowed and beat on the open boat. But Turlogh feared not. And his boat rode as it had never ridden before. Through the roaring gale and the driving snow it sped, and to the mind of the Dalcassian it seemed that the Dark Man lent him aid. Surely he had been lost a hundred times without supernatural assistance. With all his skill at boat-handling he wrought, and it seemed to him that there was an unseen hand on the tiller, and at the oar; that more than human skill aided him when he trimmed his sail.

And when all the world was a driving white veil in which even the Gael's sense of direction was lost, it seemed to him that he was steering in compliance with a silent voice that spoke in the dim reaches of his consciousness. Nor was he surprized when at last, when the snow had ceased and the clouds had rolled away beneath a cold silvery moon, he saw land loom up ahead and recognized it as the isle of Helni. More, he knew that just around a point of land was the bay where Thorfel's dragon ship was moored when not ranging the seas, and a hundred yards back from the bay lay Thorfel's skalli. He grinned fiercely. All the skill in the world could not have brought him to this exact spot – it was pure luck – no, it was more than luck. Here was the best place possible for him to make an approach – within half a mile of his foe's hold, yet hidden from sight of any watchers by this jutting promontory. He glanced at the Dark Man in the bows – brooding, inscrutable as the sphinx. A strange feeling stole over the Gael – that all this was his work; that he, Turlogh, was only a pawn in the game. What was this fetish? What grim secret did those carven eyes hold? Why did the dark little men fight so terribly for him?

Turlogh ran his boat inshore, into a small creek. A few yards up this he anchored and stepped out on shore. A last glance at the brooding Dark Man in the bows, and he turned and went hurriedly up the slope of the promontory, keeping to cover as much as possible. At the top of the slope he gazed down on the other side. Less than half a mile away Thorfel's dragon ship lay at anchor. And there lay Thorfel's skalli, also the long low building of rough-hewn log emitting the gleams that betokened the roaring fires within. Shouts of wassail came clearly to the listener through the sharp still air. He ground his teeth. Wassail! Aye, they were celebrating the ruin and destruction they had committed – the homes left in smoking embers – the slain men – the ravished girls. They were lords of the world, these vikings – all the southland lay helpless beneath their swords. The southland folk lived only to furnish them sport – and slaves – Turlogh shuddered violently and shook as if in a chill. The blood-sickness was on him like a physical pain, but he fought back the mists of passion that clouded his brain. He was here, not to fight but to steal away the girl they had stolen.

He took careful note of the ground, like a general going over the plan of his campaign. He noted that the trees grew thick close behind the skalli; that the smaller houses, the storehouses and servants' huts were between the main building and the bay. A huge fire was blazing down by the shore and a few carles were roaring and drinking about it, but the fierce cold had driven most of them into the drinking-hall of the main building.

Turlogh crept down the thickly wooded slope, entering the forest which swept about in a wide curve away from the shore. He kept to the fringe of its shadows, approaching the skalli in a rather indirect route, but afraid to strike out boldly in the open lest he be seen by the watchers that Thorfel surely had out. Gods, if he only had the warriors of Clare at his back as he had of old! Then there would be no skulking like a wolf among the trees! His hand locked like iron on his ax-haft as he visualized the scene – the charge, the shouting, the blood-letting, the play of the Dalcassian axes – he sighed. He was a lone outcast; never again would he lead the swordsmen of his clan to battle.

He dropped suddenly in the snow behind a low shrub and lay still. Men were approaching from the same direction in which he had come – men who grumbled loudly and walked heavily. They came into sight – two of them, huge Norse warriors, their silver-scaled armor flashing in the moonlight. They were carrying something between them with difficulty and to Turlogh's amazement he saw it was the Dark Man. His consternation at the realization that they had found his boat was gulfed in a greater astonishment. These men were giants; their arms bulged with iron muscles. Yet they were staggering under what seemed a stupendous weight. In their hands the Dark Man seemed to weigh hundreds of pounds; yet Turlogh had lifted it lightly as a feather! He almost swore in his amazement. Surely these men were drunk. One of them spoke, and Turlogh's short neck hairs bristled at the sound of the guttural accents, as a dog will bristle at the sight of a foe.

"Let it down; Thor's death, the thing weighs a ton. Let's rest."

The other grunted a reply and they began to ease the image to the earth. Then one of them lost his hold on it; his hand slipped and the Dark Man crashed heavily into the snow. The first speaker howled.

"You clumsy fool, you dropped it on my foot! Curse you, my ankle's broken!"

"It twisted out of my hand!" cried the other. "The thing's alive, I tell you!"

"Then I'll slay it," snarled the lamed viking, and drawing his sword, he struck savagely at the prostrate figure. Fire flashed as the blade shivered into a hundred pieces, and the other Norseman howled as a flying sliver of steel gashed his cheek.

"The devil's in it!" shouted the other, throwing his hilt away. "I've not even scratched it! Here, take hold – let's get it into the ale-hall and let Thorfel deal

with it."

"Let it lie," growled the second man, wiping the blood from his face. "I'm bleeding like a butchered hog. Let's go back and tell Thorfel that there's no ship stealing on the island. That's what he sent us to the point to see."

"What of the boat where we found this?" snapped the other. "Some Scotch fisher driven out of his course by the storm and hiding like a rat in the woods now, I guess. Here, bear a hand; idol or devil, we'll carry this to Thorfel."

Grunting with the effort, they lifted the image once more and went on slowly, one groaning and cursing as he limped along, the other shaking his head from time to time as the blood got into his eyes.

Turlogh rose stealthily and watched them. A touch of chilliness traveled up and down his spine. Either of these men was as strong as he, yet it was taxing their powers to the utmost to carry what he had handled easily. He shook his head and took up his way again.

At last he reached a point in the woods nearest the skalli. Now was the crucial test. Somehow he must reach that building and hide himself, unperceived. Clouds were gathering. He waited until one obscured the moon, and in the gloom that followed, ran swiftly and silently across the snow, crouching. A shadow out of the shadows he seemed. The shouts and songs from within the long building were deafening. Now he was close to its side, flattening himself against the rough-hewn logs. Vigilance was most certainly relaxed now – yet what foe should Thorfel expect, when he was friends with all northern reavers, and none else could be expected to fare forth on a night such as this had been?

A shadow among the shadows, Turlogh stole about the house. He noted a side door and slid cautiously to it. Then he drew back close against the wall. Some one within was fumbling at the latch. Then the door was flung open and a big warrior lurched out, slamming the door to behind him. Then he saw Turlogh. His bearded lips parted, but in that instant the Gael's hands shot to his throat and locked there like a wolf-trap. The threatened yell died in a gasp. One hand flew to Turlogh's wrist, the other drew a dagger and stabbed upward. But already the man was senseless; the dagger rattled feebly against the outlaw's corselet and dropped into the snow. The Norseman sagged in his slayer's grasp, his throat literally crushed by that iron grip. Turlogh flung him contemptuously into the snow and spat in his dead face before he turned again to the door. The latch had not fastened within. The door sagged a trifle. Turlogh peered in and saw an empty room, piled with ale barrels. He entered

noiselessly, shutting the door but not latching it. He thought of hiding his victim's body, but he did not know how he could do it. He must trust to luck that no one saw it in the deep snow where it lay. He crossed the room and found it let into another parallel with the outer wall. This was also a storeroom, and was empty. From this a doorway, without a door but furnished with a curtain of skins, let into the main hall, as Turlogh could tell from the sounds on the other side. He peered out cautiously.

He was looking into the drinking-hall – the great hall which served as banquet, council and living-hall of the master of the skalli. This hall, with its smoke-blackened rafters, great roaring fireplaces, and heavily laden boards, was a scene of terrific revelry tonight. Huge warriors with golden beards and savage eyes sat or lounged on the rude benches, strode about the hall or sprawled full length on the floor. They drank mightily from foaming horns and leathern jacks, and gorged themselves on great pieces of rye bread, and huge chunks of meat they cut with their daggers from whole roasted joints. It was a scene of strange incongruity, for in contrast with these barbaric men and their rough songs and shouts, the walls were hung with rare spoils that betokened civilized workmanship. Fine tapestries that Norman women had worked; richly chased weapons that princes of France and Spain had wielded; armor and silken garments from Byzantium and the Orient – for the dragon ships ranged far. With these were placed the spoils of the hunt, to show the viking's mastery of beasts as well as men.

The modern man can scarcely conceive of Turlogh O'Brien's feeling toward these men. To him they were devils – ogres who dwelt in the north only to descend on the peaceful people of the south. All the world was their prey to pick and choose, to take and spare as it pleased their barbaric whims. His brain throbbed and burned as he gazed. As only the Gael can hate, he hated them – their magnificent arrogance, their pride and their power, their contempt for all other races, their stern, forbidding eyes – above all else he hated the eyes that looked scorn and menace on the world. The Gaels were cruel but they had strange moments of sentiment and kindness. There was no sentiment in the Norse make-up.

The sight of this revelry was like a slap in Black Turlogh's face, and only one thing was needed to make his madness complete. This was furnished. At the head of the board sat Thorfel the Fair, young, handsome, arrogant, flushed with wine and pride. He *was* handsome, was young Thorfel. In build he much resembled Turlogh himself, except that he was larger in every way, but there the resemblance ceased. As Turlogh was exceptionally dark among a dark people, Thorfel was exceptionally blond among a people essentially fair. His

hair and mustache were like fine-spun gold and his light gray eyes flashed scintillant lights. By his side – Turlogh's nails bit into his palms. Moira of the O'Briens seemed greatly out of place among these huge blond men and strapping yellow-haired women. She was small, almost frail, and her hair was black with glossy bronze tints. But her skin was fair as theirs, with a delicate rose tint their most beautiful women could not boast. Her full lips were white now with fear and she shrank from the clamor and uproar. Turlogh saw her tremble as Thorfel insolently put his arm about her. The hall waved redly before Turlogh's eyes and he fought doggedly for control.

"Thorfel's brother, Osric, to his right," he muttered to himself; "on the other side Tostig, the Dane, who can cleave an ox in half with that great sword of his – they say. And there is Halfgar, and Sweyn, and Oswick, and Athelstane, the Saxon – the one *man* of a pack of sea-wolves. And name of the devil – what is this? A priest?"

A priest it was, sitting white and still in the rout, silently counting his beads, while his eyes wandered pityingly toward the slender Irish girl at the head of the board. Then Turlogh saw something else. On a smaller table to one side, a table of mahogany whose rich scrollwork showed that it was loot from the southland, stood the Dark Man. The two crippled Norsemen had brought it to the hall, after all. The sight of it brought a strange shock to Turlogh and cooled his seething brain. Only five feet tall? It seemed much larger now, somehow. It loomed above the revelry, as a god that broods on deep dark matters beyond the ken of the human insects who howl at his feet. As always when looking at the Dark Man, Turlogh felt as if a door had suddenly opened on outer space and the wind that blows among the stars. Waiting – waiting – for whom? Perhaps the carven eyes of the Dark Man looked through the skalli walls, across the snowy waste, and over the promontory. Perhaps those sightless eyes saw the five boats that even now slid silently with muffled oars, through the calm dark waters. But of this Turlogh Dubh knew nothing; nothing of the boats or their silent rowers; small, dark men with inscrutable eyes.

Thorfel's voice cut through the din: "Ho, friends!" They fell silent and turned as the young sea-king rose to his feet. "Tonight," he thundered, "I am taking a bride!"

A thunder of applause shook the smoky rafters. Turlogh cursed with sick fury.

Thorfel caught up the girl with rough gentleness and set her on the board.

"Is she not a fit bride for a viking?" he shouted. "True, she's a bit shy, but

that’s only natural.”

“All Irish are cowards!” shouted Oswick.

“As proved by Clontarf and the scar on your jaw!” rumbled Athelstane, which gentle thrust made Oswick wince and brought a roar of rough mirth from the throng.

“’Ware her temper, Thorfel,” called a bold-eyed young Juno who sat with the warriors; “Irish girls have claws like cats.”

Thorfel laughed with the confidence of a man used to mastery. “I’ll teach her her lessons with a stout birch switch. But enough. It grows late. Priest, marry us.”

“Daughter,” said the priest, unsteadily, rising, “these pagan men have brought me here by violence to perform Christian nuptials in an ungodly house. Do you marry this man willingly?”

“No! No! Oh God, no!” Moira screamed with a wild despair that brought the sweat to Turlogh’s forehead. “Oh most holy master, save me from this fate! They tore me from my home – struck down the brother that would have saved me! This man bore me off as if I were a chattel – a soulless beast!”

“Be silent!” thundered Thorfel, slapping her across the mouth, lightly but with enough force to bring a trickle of blood from her delicate lips. “By Thor, you grow independent. I am determined to have a wife, and all the squeals of a puling little wench will not stop me. Why, you graceless hussy, am I not wedding you in the Christian manner, simply because of your foolish superstitions? Take care that I do not dispense with the nuptials, and take you as slave, not wife!”

“Daughter,” quavered the priest, afraid, not for himself, but for her, “bethink you! This man offers you more than many a man would offer. It is at least an honorable married state.”

“Aye,” rumbled Athelstane, “marry him like a good wench and make the best of it. There’s more than one southland woman on the cross benches of the north.”

What can I do? The question tore through Turlogh’s brain. There was but one thing to do – wait until the ceremony was over and Thorfel had retired with his bride. Then steal her away as best he could. After that – but he dared not

look ahead. He had done and would do his best. What he did, he of necessity did alone; a masterless man had no friends, even among masterless men. There was no way to reach Moira to tell her of his presence. She must go through with the wedding without even the slim hope of deliverance that knowledge of his presence might have lent. Instinctively his eyes flashed to the Dark Man standing somber and aloof from the rout. At his feet the old quarreled with the new – the pagan with the Christian – and Turlogh even in that moment felt that the old and new were alike young to the Dark Man.

Did the carven ears of the Dark Man hear strange prows grating on the beach, the stroke of a stealthy knife in the night, the gurgle that marks the severed throat? Those in the skalli heard only their own noise and those who revelled by the fires outside sang on, unaware of the silent coils of death closing about them.

“Enough!” shouted Thorfel. “Count your beads and mutter your mummery, priest! Come here, wench, and marry!” He jerked the girl off the board and plumped her down on her feet before him. She tore loose from him with flaming eyes. All the hot Gaelic blood was roused in her.

“You yellow-haired swine!” she cried. “Do you think that a princess of Clare, with Brian Boru’s blood in her veins, would sit at the cross bench of a barbarian and bear the tow-headed cubs of a northern thief? No – I’ll never marry you!”

“Then I’ll take you as a slave!” he roared, snatching at her wrist.

“Nor that way, either, swine!” she exclaimed, her fear forgotten in fierce triumph. With the speed of light she snatched a dagger from his girdle, and before he could seize her she drove the keen blade under her heart. The priest cried out as though he had received the wound, and springing forward, caught her in his arms as she fell.

“The curse of Almighty God on you, Thorfel!” he cried, with a voice that rang like a clarion, as he bore her to a couch near by.

Thorfel stood nonplussed. Silence reigned for an instant, and in that instant Turlogh O’Brien went mad.

“*Lamh Laidir Abu!*” the war-cry of the O’Briens ripped through the stillness like the scream of a wounded panther, and as men whirled toward the shriek, the frenzied Gael came through the doorway like the blast of a wind from hell. He was in the grip of the Celtic black fury beside which the berserk rage

of the viking pales. Eyes glaring and a tinge of froth on his writhing lips, he crashed among the men who sprawled, off guard, in his path. Those terrible eyes were fixed on Thorfel at the other end of the hall, but as Turlogh rushed he smote to the right and left. His charge was the rush of a whirlwind that left a litter of dead and dying men in his wake.

Benches crashed to the floor, men yelled, ale flooded from upset casks. Swift as was the Celt's attack, two men blocked his way with drawn swords before he could reach Thorfel – Halfgar and Oswick. The scarred-faced viking went down with a cleft skull before he could lift his weapon, and Turlogh, catching Halfgar's blade on his shield, struck again like lightning and the keen ax sheared through hauberk, ribs and spine.

The hall was in a terrific uproar. Men were seizing weapons and pressing forward from all sides, and in the midst the lone Gael raged silently and terribly. Like a wounded tiger was Turlogh Dubh in his madness. His eery movement was a blur of speed, an explosion of dynamic force. Scarce had Halfgar fallen before the Gael leaped across his crumpling form at Thorfel, who had drawn his sword and stood as if bewildered. But a rush of carles swept between them. Swords rose and fell and the Dalcassian ax flashed among them like the play of summer lightning. On either hand and from before and behind a warrior drove at him. From one side Osric rushed, swinging a two-handed sword; from the other a house-carle drove in with a spear. Turlogh stooped beneath the swing of the sword and struck a double blow, forehand and back. Thorfel's brother dropped, hewed through the knee, and the carle died on his feet as the back-lash return drove the ax's back-spike through his skull. Turlogh straightened, dashing his shield into the face of the swordsman who rushed him from the front. The spike in the center of the shield made a ghastly ruin of his features; then even as the Gael wheeled cat-like to guard his rear, he felt the shadow of Death loom over him. From the corner of his eye he saw the Dane Tostig swinging his great two-handed sword, and jammed against the table, off balance, he knew that even his superhuman quickness could not save him. Then the whistling sword struck the Dark Man on the table and with a clash like thunder, shivered to a thousand blue sparks. Tostig staggered, dazedly, still holding the useless hilt, and Turlogh thrust as with a sword; the upper spike of his ax struck the Dane over the eye and crashed through to the brain.

And even at that instant, the air was filled with a strange singing and men howled. A huge carle, ax still lifted, pitched forward clumsily against the Gael, who split his skull before he saw that a flint-pointed arrow transfixed his throat. The hall seemed full of glancing beams of light that hummed like

bees and carried quick death in their humming. Turlogh risked his life for a glance toward the great doorway at the other end of the hall. Through it was pouring a strange horde. Small, dark men they were, with beady black eyes and immobile faces. They were scantily armored, but they bore swords, spears and bows. Now at close range they drove their long black arrows point-blank and the carles went down in windrows.

Now a red wave of combat swept the skalli hall, a storm of strife that shattered tables, smashed the benches, tore the hangings and the trophies from the walls, and stained the floors with a red lake. There had been less of the dark strangers than vikings, but in the surprize of the attack, the first flight of arrows had evened the odds, and now at hand-grips the strange warriors showed themselves in no way inferior to their huge foes. Dazed by surprize and the ale they had drunk, with no time to arm themselves fully, the Norsemen yet fought back with all the reckless ferocity of their race. But the primitive fury of their attackers matched their own valor, and at the head of the hall, where a white-faced priest shielded a dying girl, Black Turlogh tore and ripped with a frenzy that made valor and fury alike futile.

And over all towered the Dark Man. To Turlogh's shifting glances, caught between the flash of sword and ax, it seemed that the image had grown – expanded – heightened; that it loomed giant-like over the battle; that its head rose into the smoke-filled rafters of the great hall; that it brooded like a dark cloud of death over these insects who cut each other's throats at its feet. Turlogh sensed in the lightning sword-play and the slaughter that this was the proper element of the Dark Man. Violence and fury were exuded by him. The raw scent of fresh-spilled blood was good to his nostrils and these yellow-haired corpses that rattled at his feet were as sacrifices to him.

The storm of battle rocked the mighty hall. The skalli became a shambles where men slipped in pools of blood, and slipping, died. Heads spun grinning from slumping shoulders. Barbed spears tore the heart, still beating, from the gory breast. Brains splashed and clotted the madly driving axes. Daggers lunged upward, ripping bellies and spilling entrails upon the floor. The clash and clangor of steel rose deafeningly. No quarter was asked or given. A wounded Norseman had dragged down one of the dark men, and doggedly strangled him regardless of the dagger his victim plunged again and again into his body.

One of the dark men seized a child who ran howling from an inner room, and dashed its brains out against the wall. Another gripped a Norse woman by her golden hair and hurling her to her knees, cut her throat, while she spat in his

face. One listening for cries of fear or pleas for mercy would have heard none; men, women or children, they died slashing and clawing, their last gasp a sob of fury, or a snarl of quenchless hatred.

And about the table where stood the Dark Man, immovable as a mountain, washed the red waves of slaughter. Norseman and tribesman died at his feet. How many red infernos of slaughter and madness have your strange carved eyes gazed upon, Dark Man?

Shoulder to shoulder Sweyn and Thorfel fought. The Saxon Athelstane, his golden beard a-bristle with the battle-joy, had placed his back against the wall and a man fell at each sweep of his two-handed ax. Now Turlogh came in like a wave, avoiding, with a lithe twist of his upper body, the first ponderous stroke. Now the superiority of the light Irish ax was proved, for before the Saxon could shift his heavy weapon, the Dalcassian ax licked out like a striking cobra and Athelstane reeled as the edge bit through the corselet into the ribs beneath. Another stroke and he crumpled, blood gushing from his temple.

Now none barred Turlogh's way to Thorfel except Sweyn, and even as the Gael leaped like a panther toward the slashing pair, one was ahead of him. The chief of the dark men glided like a shadow under the slash of Sweyn's sword, and his own short blade thrust upward under the shirt of mail. Thorfel faced Turlogh alone. Thorfel was no coward; he even laughed with pure battle-joy as he thrust, but there was no mirth in Black Turlogh's face, only a frantic rage that writhed his lips and made his eyes coals of blue fire.

In the first whirl of steel Thorfel's sword broke. The young sea-king leaped like a tiger at his foe, thrusting with the shards of the blade. Turlogh laughed fiercely as the jagged remnant gashed his cheek, and at the same instant he cut Thorfel's left foot from under him. The Norseman fell with a heavy crash, then struggled to his knees, clawing for his dagger. His eyes were clouded.

"Make an end, curse you!" he snarled.

Turlogh laughed. "Where is your power and your glory, now?" he taunted. "You who would have for unwilling wife an Irish princess – you — "

Suddenly his hate strangled him, and with a howl like a maddened panther he swung his ax in a whistling arc that cleft the Norseman from shoulder to breast-bone. Another stroke severed the head, and with the grisly trophy in his hand he approached the couch where lay Moira O'Brien. The priest had lifted her head and held a goblet of wine to her pale lips. Her cloudy gray eyes

rested with slight recognition on Turlogh – but it seemed at last she knew him and she tried to smile.

“Moira, blood of my heart,” said the outlaw heavily, “you die in a strange land. But the birds in the Cullane hills will weep for you, and the heather will sigh in vain for the tread of your little feet. But you shall not be forgotten; axes shall drip for you and for you shall galleys crash and walled cities go up in flames. And that your ghost go not unassuaged into the realms of Tir-na-n-Oge, behold this token of vengeance!”

And he held forth the dripping head of Thorfel.

“In God’s name, my son,” said the priest, his voice husky with horror, “have done – have done. Will you do your ghastly deeds in the very presence of – see, she is dead. May God in His infinite justice have mercy on her soul, for though she took her own life, yet she died as she lived, in innocence and purity.”

Turlogh dropped his ax-head to the floor and his head was bowed. All the fire of his madness had left him and there remained only a dark sadness, a deep sense of futility and weariness. Over all the hall there was no sound. No groans of the wounded were raised, for the knives of the little dark men had been at work, and save their own, there were no wounded. Turlogh sensed that the survivors had gathered about the statue on the table and now stood looking at him with inscrutable eyes. The priest mumbled over the corpse of the girl, telling his beads. Flame ate at the farther wall of the building, but none heeded it. Then from among the dead on the floor a huge form heaved up unsteadily. Athelstane the Saxon, overlooked by the killers, leaned against the wall and stared about dazedly. Blood flowed from a wound in his ribs and another in his scalp where Turlogh’s ax had struck glancingly.

The Gael walked over to him. “I have no hatred for you, Saxon,” said he, heavily, “but blood calls for blood and you must die.”

Athelstane looked at him without an answer. His large gray eyes were serious but without fear. He too was a barbarian – more pagan than Christian; he too realized the rights of the blood-feud. But as Turlogh raised his ax, the priest sprang between, his thin hands outstretched, his eyes haggard.

“Have done! In God’s name I command you! Almighty Powers, has not enough blood been shed this fearful night? In the name of the Most High, I claim this man.”

Turlogh dropped his ax. “He is yours; not for your oath or your curse, not for your creed but for that you too are a man and did your best for Moira.”

A touch on his arm made Turlogh turn. The chief of the strangers stood regarding him with inscrutable eyes.

“Who are you?” asked the Gael idly. He did not care; he felt only weariness.

“I am Brogar, chief of the Picts, Friend of the Dark Man.”

“Why do you call me that?” asked Turlogh.

“He rode in the bows of your boat and guided you to Helni through wind and snow. He saved your life when he broke the great sword of the Dane.”

Turlogh glanced at the brooding Dark One. It seemed there must be a human or superhuman intelligence behind those strange stone eyes. Was it chance alone that caused Tostig’s sword to strike the image as he swung it in a death blow?

“What is this thing?” asked the Gael.

“It is the only god we have left,” answered the other somberly. “It is the image of our greatest king, Bran Mak Morn, he who gathered the broken lines of the Pictish tribes into a single mighty nation, he who drove forth the Norseman and Briton and shattered the legions of Rome, centuries ago. A wizard made this statue while the great Morni yet lived and reigned, and when he died in the last great battle, his spirit entered into it. It is our god.

“Ages ago we ruled. Before the Dane, before the Gael, before the Briton, before the Roman, we reigned in the western isles. Our stone circles rose to the sun. We worked in flint and hides and were happy. Then came the Celts and drove us into the wildernesses. They held the southland. But we throve in the north and were strong. Rome broke the Britons and came against us. But there rose among us Bran Mak Morn, of the blood of Brule the Spear-slayer, the friend of King Kull of Valusia who reigned thousands of years ago before Atlantis sank. Bran became king of all Caledon. He broke the iron ranks of Rome and sent the legions cowering south behind their Wall.

“Bran Mak Morn fell in battle; the nation fell apart. Civil wars rocked it. The Gaels came and reared the kingdom of Dalriadia above the ruins of the Cruithni. When the Scot Kenneth MacAlpine broke the kingdom of Galloway, the last remnant of the Pictish empire faded like snow on the mountains. Like

wolves we live now among the scattered islands, among the crags of the highlands and the dim hills of Galloway. We are a fading people. We pass. But the Dark Man remains – the Dark One, the great king, Bran Mak Morn, whose ghost dwells forever in the stone likeness of his living self."

As in a dream Turlogh saw an ancient Pict who looked much like the one in whose dead arms he had found the Dark Man, lift the image from the table. The old man's arms were thin as withered branches and his skin clung to his skull like a mummy's, but he handled with ease the image that two strong vikings had had trouble in carrying.

As if reading his thoughts Brogar spoke softly: "Only a friend may with safety touch the Dark One. We knew you to be a friend, for he rode in your boat and did you no harm."

"How know you this?"

"The Old One," pointing to the white-bearded ancient, "Gonar, high priest of the Dark One – the ghost of Bran comes to him in dreams. It was Grok, the lesser priest and his people who stole the image and took to sea in a long boat. In dreams Gonar followed; aye, as he slept he sent his spirit with the ghost of the Morni, and he saw the pursuit by the Danes, the battle and slaughter on the Isle of Swords. He saw you come and find the Dark One, and he saw that the ghost of the great king was pleased with you. Wo to the foes of the Mak Morn! But good luck shall fare the friends of him."

Turlogh came to himself as from a trance. The heat of the burning hall was in his face and the flickering flames lit and shadowed the carven face of the Dark Man as his worshippers bore him from the building, lending it a strange life. Was it, in truth, that the spirit of a long-dead king lived in that cold stone? Bran Mak Morn loved his people with a savage love; he hated their foes with a terrible hate. Was it possible to breathe into inanimate blind stone a pulsating love and hate that should outlast the centuries?

Turlogh lifted the still, slight form of the dead girl and bore her out of the flaming hall. Five long open boats lay at anchor, and scattered about the embers of the fires the carles had lit, lay the reddened corpses of the revelers who had died silently.

"How stole ye upon these undiscovered?" asked Turlogh. "And whence came you in those open boats?"

"The stealth of the panther is theirs who live by stealth," answered the Pict.

“And these were drunken. We followed the path of the Dark One and we came hither from the Isle of the Altar, near the Scottish mainland, from whence Grok stole the Dark Man.”

Turlogh knew no island of that name but he did realize the courage of these men in daring the seas in boats such as these. He thought of his own boat and requested Brogar to send some of his men for it. The Pict did so. While he waited for them to bring it around the point, he watched the priest bandaging the wounds of the survivors. Silent, immobile, they spoke no word either of complaint or thanks.

The fisherman’s boat came scudding around the point just as the first hint of sunrise reddened the waters. The Picts were getting into their boats, lifting in the dead and wounded. Turlogh stepped into his boat and gently eased his pitiful burden down.

“She shall sleep in her own land,” he said somberly. “She shall not lie in this cold foreign isle. Brogar, whither go you?”

“We take the Dark One back to his isle and his altar,” said the Pict. “Through the mouth of his people he thanks you. The tie of blood is between us, Gael, and mayhap we shall come to you again in your need, as Bran Mak Morn, great king of Pictdom, shall come again to his people some day in the days to come.”

“And you, good Jerome? You will come with me?”

The priest shook his head and pointed to Athelstane. The wounded Saxon reposed on a rude couch made of skins piled in the snow.

“I stay here to attend to this man. He is sorely wounded.”

Turlogh looked about. The walls of the skalli had crashed into a mass of glowing embers. Brogar’s men had set fire to the storehouses and the long galley, and the smoke and flame vied luridly with the growing morning light.

“You will freeze or starve. Come with me.”

“I will find sustenance for us both. Persuade me not, my son.”

“He is a pagan and a reaver.”

“No matter. He is a human – a living creature. I will not leave him to die.”

“So be it.”

Turlogh prepared to cast off. The boats of the Picts were already rounding the point. The rhythmic clack of their oar-locks came clearly to him. They looked not back, bending stolidly to their work.

He glanced at the stiff corpses about the beach, at the charred embers of the skalli and the glowing timbers of the galley. In the glare the priest seemed unearthly in his thinness and whiteness, like a saint from some old illuminated manuscript. In his worn pallid face was a more than human sadness, a greater than human weariness.

“Look!” he cried suddenly, pointing seaward. “The ocean is of blood! See how it swims red in the rising sun! Oh, my people, my people, the blood you have spilt in anger turns the very seas to scarlet! How can you win through?”

“I came in the snow and sleet,” said Turlogh, not understanding at first. “I go as I came.”

The priest shook his head. “It is more than a mortal sea. Your hands are red with blood and you follow a red sea-path, yet the fault is not wholly with you. Almighty God, when will the reign of blood cease?”

Turlogh shook his head. “Not so long as the race lasts.”

The morning wind caught and filled his sail. Into the west he raced like a shadow fleeing the dawn. And so passed Turlogh Dubh O’Brien from the sight of the priest Jerome, who stood watching, shading his weary brow with his thin hand, until the boat was but a tiny speck far out on the tossing wastes of the blue ocean.

The Lost Race

The Lost Race

Cororuc glanced about him and hastened his pace. He was no coward, but he did not like the place. Tall trees rose all about, their sullen branches shutting out the sunlight. The dim trail led in and out among them, sometimes skirting the edge of a ravine, where Cororuc could gaze down at the tree-tops beneath. Occasionally, through a rift in the forest, he could see away to the forbidding

hills that hinted of the ranges much farther to the west, that were the mountains of Cornwall.

In those mountains the bandit chief, Buruc the Cruel, was supposed to lurk, to descend upon such victims as might pass that way. Cororuc shifted his grip on his spear and quickened his step. His haste was due not only to the menace of the outlaws, but also to the fact that he wished once more to be in his native land. He had been on a secret mission to the wild Cornish tribesmen; and though he had been more or less successful, he was impatient to be out of their inhospitable country. It had been a long, wearisome trip, and he still had nearly the whole of Britain to traverse. He threw a glance of aversion about him. He longed for the pleasant woodlands, with scampering deer, and chirping birds, to which he was used. He longed for the tall white cliff, where the blue sea lapped merrily. The forest through which he was passing seemed uninhabited. There were no birds, no animals; nor had he seen a sign of a human habitation.

His comrades still lingered at the savage court of the Cornish king, enjoying his crude hospitality, in no hurry to be away. But Cororuc was not content. So he had left them to follow at their leisure and had set out alone.

Rather a fine figure of a man was Cororuc. Some six feet in height, strongly though leanly built, he was, with gray eyes, a pure Briton but not a pure Celt, his long yellow hair revealing, in him as in all his race, a trace of Belgae.

He was clad in skilfully dressed deerskin, for the Celts had not yet perfected the coarse cloth which they made, and most of the race preferred the hides of deer.

He was armed with a long bow of yew wood, made with no especial skill but an efficient weapon; a long bronze broadsword, with a buckskin sheath, a long bronze dagger and a small, round shield, rimmed with a band of bronze and covered with tough buffalo hide. A crude bronze helmet was on his head. Faint devices were painted in woad on his arms and cheeks.

His beardless face was of the highest type of Briton, clear, straightforward, the shrewd, practical determination of the Nordic mingling with the reckless courage and dreamy artistry of the Celt.

So Cororuc trod the forest path, warily, ready to flee or fight, but preferring to do neither just then.

The trail led away from the ravine, disappearing around a great tree. And

from the other side of the tree, Cororuc heard sounds of conflict. Gliding warily forward, and wondering whether he should see some of the elves and dwarfs that were reputed to haunt those woodlands, he peered around the great tree.

A few feet from him he saw a strange tableau. Backed against another tree stood a large wolf, at bay, blood trickling from gashes about his shoulder; while before him, crouching for a spring, the warrior saw a great panther. Cororuc wondered at the cause of the battle. Not often the lords of the forest met in warfare. And he was puzzled by the snarls of the great cat. Savage, blood-lusting, yet they held a strange note of fear; and the beast seemed hesitant to spring in.

Just why Cororuc chose to take the part of the wolf, he himself could not have said. Doubtless it was just the reckless chivalry of the Celt of him, an admiration for the dauntless attitude of the wolf against his far more powerful foe. Be that as it may, Cororuc, characteristically forgetting his bow and taking the more reckless course, drew his sword and leaped in front of the panther. But he had no chance to use it. The panther, whose nerve appeared to be already somewhat shaken, uttered a startled screech and disappeared among the trees so quickly that Cororuc wondered if he had really seen a panther. He turned to the wolf, wondering if it would leap upon him. It was watching him, half crouching; slowly it stepped away from the tree, and still watching him, backed away a few yards, then turned and made off with a strange shambling gait. As the warrior watched it vanish into the forest, an uncanny feeling came over him; he had seen many wolves, he had hunted them and had been hunted by them, but he had never seen such a wolf before.

He hesitated and then walked warily after the wolf, following the tracks that were plainly defined in the soft loam. He did not hasten, being merely content to follow the tracks. After a short distance, he stopped short, the hairs on his neck seeming to bristle. *Only the tracks of the hind feet showed: the wolf was walking erect.*

He glanced about him. There was no sound; the forest was silent. He felt an impulse to turn and put as much territory between him and the mystery as possible, but his Celtic curiosity would not allow it. He followed the trail. And then it ceased altogether. Beneath a great tree the tracks vanished. Cororuc felt the cold sweat on his forehead. What kind of place was that forest? Was he being led astray and eluded by some inhuman, supernatural monster of the woodlands, who sought to ensnare him? And Cororuc backed away, his sword lifted, his courage not allowing him to run, but greatly

desiring to do so. And so he came again to the tree where he had first seen the wolf. The trail he had followed led away from it in another direction and Cororuc took it up, almost running in his haste to get out of the vicinity of a wolf who walked on two legs and then vanished in the air.

The trail wound about more tediously than ever, appearing and disappearing within a dozen feet, but it was well for Cororuc that it did, for thus he heard the voices of the men coming up the path before they saw him. He took to a tall tree that branched over the trail, lying close to the great bole, along a wide-flung branch.

Three men were coming down the forest path.

One was a big, burly fellow, vastly over six feet in height, with a long red beard and a great mop of red hair. In contrast, his eyes were a beady black. He was dressed in deerskins, and armed with a great sword.

Of the two others, one was a lanky, villainous-looking scoundrel, with only one eye, and the other was a small, wizened man, who squinted hideously with both beady eyes.

Cororuc knew them, by descriptions the Cornishmen had made between curses, and it was in his excitement to get a better view of the most villainous murderer in Britain that he slipped from the tree branch and plunged to the ground directly between them.

He was up on the instant, his sword out. He could expect no mercy; for he knew that the red-haired man was Buruc the Cruel, the scourge of Cornwall.

The bandit chief bellowed a foul curse and whipped out his great sword. He avoided the Briton’s furious thrust by a swift backward leap and then the battle was on. Buruc rushed the warrior from the front, striving to beat him down by sheer weight; while the lanky, one-eyed villain slipped around, trying to get behind him. The smaller man had retreated to the edge of the forest. The fine art of the fence was unknown to those early swordsmen. It was hack, slash, stab, the full weight of the arm behind each blow. The terrific blows crashing on his shield beat Cororuc to the ground, and the lanky, one-eyed villain rushed in to finish him. Cororuc spun about without rising, cut the bandit’s legs from under him and stabbed him as he fell, then threw himself to one side and to his feet, in time to avoid Buruc’s sword. Again, driving his shield up to catch the bandit’s sword in midair, he deflected it and whirled his own with all his power. Buruc’s head flew from his shoulders.

Then Cororuc, turning, saw the wizened bandit scurry into the forest. He raced after him, but the fellow had disappeared among the trees. Knowing the uselessness of attempting to pursue him, Cororuc turned and raced down the trail. He did not know if there were more bandits in that direction, but he did know that if he expected to get out of the forest at all, he would have to do it swiftly. Without doubt the villain who had escaped would have all the other bandits out, and soon they would be beating the woodlands for him.

After running for some distance down the path and seeing no sign of any enemy, he stopped and climbed into the topmost branches of a tall tree, that towered above its fellows.

On all sides he seemed surrounded by a leafy ocean. To the west he could see the hills he had avoided. To the north, far in the distance other hills rose; to the south the forest ran, an unbroken sea. But to the east, far away, he could barely see the line that marked the thinning out of the forest into the fertile plains. Miles and miles away, he knew not how many, but it meant more pleasant travel, villages of men, people of his own race. He was surprized that he was able to see that far, but the tree in which he stood was a giant of its kind.

Before he started to descend, he glanced about nearer at hand. He could trace the faintly marked line of the trail he had been following, running away into the east; and could make out other trails leading into it, or away from it. Then a glint caught his eye. He fixed his gaze on a glade some distance down the trail and saw, presently, a party of men enter and vanish. Here and there, on every trail, he caught glances of the glint of accouterments, the waving of foliage. So the squinting villain had already roused the bandits. They were all around him; he was virtually surrounded.

A faintly heard burst of savage yells, from back up the trail, startled him. So, they had already thrown a cordon about the place of the fight and had found him gone. Had he not fled swiftly, he would have been caught. He was outside the cordon, but the bandits were all about him. Swiftly he slipped from the tree and glided into the forest.

Then began the most exciting hunt Cororuc had ever engaged in; for he was the hunted and men were the hunters. Gliding, slipping from bush to bush and from tree to tree, now running swiftly, now crouching in a covert, Cororuc fled, ever eastward; not daring to turn back lest he be driven farther back into the forest. At times he was forced to turn his course; in fact, he very seldom fled in a straight course, yet always he managed to work farther eastward.

Sometimes he crouched in bushes or lay along some leafy branch, and saw bandits pass so close to him that he could have touched them. Once or twice they sighted him and he fled, bounding over logs and bushes, darting in and out among the trees; and always he eluded them.

It was in one of those headlong flights that he noticed he had entered a defile of small hills, of which he had been unaware, and looking back over his shoulder, saw that his pursuers had halted, within full sight. Without pausing to ruminate on so strange a thing, he darted around a great boulder, felt a vine or something catch his foot, and was thrown headlong. Simultaneously something struck the youth's head, knocking him senseless.

When Cororuc recovered his senses, he found that he was bound, hand and foot. He was being borne along, over rough ground. He looked about him. Men carried him on their shoulders, but such men as he had never seen before. Scarce above four feet stood the tallest, and they were small of build and very dark of complexion. Their eyes were black; and most of them went stooped forward, as if from a lifetime spent in crouching and hiding; peering furtively on all sides. They were armed with small bows, arrows, spears and daggers, all pointed, not with crudely worked bronze but with flint and obsidian, of the finest workmanship. They were dressed in finely dressed hides of rabbits and other small animals, and a kind of coarse cloth; and many were tattooed from head to foot in ocher and woad. There were perhaps twenty in all. What sort of men were they? Cororuc had never seen the like.

They were going down a ravine, on both sides of which steep cliffs rose. Presently they seemed to come to a blank wall, where the ravine appeared to come to an abrupt stop. Here, at a word from one who seemed to be in command, they set the Briton down, and seizing hold of a large boulder, drew it to one side. A small cavern was exposed, seeming to vanish away into the earth; then the strange men picked up the Briton and moved forward.

Cororuc's hair bristled at thought of being borne into that forbidding-looking cave. What manner of men were they? In all Britain and Alba, in Cornwall or Ireland, Cororuc had never seen such men. Small dwarfish men, who dwelt in the earth. Cold sweat broke out on the youth's forehead. Surely they were the malevolent dwarfs of whom the Cornish people had spoken, who dwelt in their caverns by day, and by night sallied forth to steal and burn dwellings, even slaying if the opportunity arose! You will hear of them, even today, if you journey in Cornwall.

The men, or elves, if such they were, bore him into the cavern, others entering

and drawing the boulder back into place. For a moment all was darkness, and then torches began to glow, away off. And at a shout they moved on. Other men of the caves came forward, with the torches.

Cororuc looked about him. The torches shed a vague glow over the scene. Sometimes one, sometimes another wall of the cave showed for an instant, and the Briton was vaguely aware that they were covered with paintings, crudely done, yet with a certain skill his own race could not equal. But always the roof remained unseen. Cororuc knew that the seemingly small cavern had merged into a cave of surprizing size. Through the vague light of the torches the strange people moved, came and went, silently, like shadows of the dim past.

He felt the cords or thongs that bound his feet loosened. He was lifted upright.

“Walk straight ahead,” said a voice, speaking the language of his own race, and he felt a spearpoint touch the back of his neck.

And straight ahead he walked, feeling his sandals scrape on the stone floor of the cave, until they came to a place where the floor tilted upward. The pitch was steep and the stone was so slippery that Cororuc could not have climbed it alone. But his captors pushed him, and pulled him, and he saw that long, strong vines were strung from somewhere at the top.

Those the strange men seized, and bracing their feet against the slippery ascent, went up swiftly. When their feet found level surface again, the cave made a turn, and Cororuc blundered out into a firelit scene that made him gasp.

The cave debouched into a cavern so vast as to be almost incredible. The mighty walls swept up into a great arched roof that vanished in the darkness. A level floor lay between, and through it flowed a river; an underground river. From under one wall it flowed to vanish silently under the other. An arched stone bridge, seemingly of natural make, spanned the current.

All around the walls of the great cavern, which was roughly circular, were smaller caves, and before each glowed a fire. Higher up were other caves, regularly arranged, tier on tier. Surely human men could not have built such a city.

In and out among the caves, on the level floor of the main cavern, people were going about what seemed daily tasks. Men were talking together and mending weapons, some were fishing from the river; women were

replenishing fires, preparing garments; and altogether it might have been any other village in Britain, to judge from their occupations. But it all struck Cororuc as extremely unreal; the strange place, the small, silent people, going about their tasks, the river flowing silently through it all.

Then they became aware of the prisoner and flocked about him. There was none of the shouting, abuse and indignities, such as savages usually heap on their captives, as the small men drew about Cororuc, silently eyeing him with malevolent, wolfish stares. The warrior shuddered, in spite of himself.

But his captors pushed through the throng, driving the Briton before them. Close to the bank of the river, they stopped and drew away from around him.

Two great fires leaped and flickered in front of him and there was something between them. He focused his gaze and presently made out the object. A high stone seat, like a throne; and in it seated an aged man, with a long white beard, silent, motionless, but with black eyes that gleamed like a wolf's.

The ancient was clothed in some kind of a single, flowing garment. One clawlike hand rested on the seat near him, skinny, crooked fingers, with talons like a hawk's. The other hand was hidden among his garments.

The firelight danced and flickered; now the old man stood out clearly, his hooked, beaklike nose and long beard thrown into bold relief; now he seemed to recede until he was invisible to the gaze of the Briton, except for his glittering eyes.

"Speak, Briton!" The words came suddenly, strong, clear, without a hint of age. "Speak, what would ye say?"

Cororuc, taken aback, stammered and said, "Why, why – what manner of people are you? Why have you taken me prisoner? Are you elves?"

"We are Picts," was the stern reply.

"Picts!" Cororuc had heard tales of those ancient people from the Gaelic Britons; some said that they still lurked in the hills of Siluria, but —

"I have fought Picts in Caledonia," the Briton protested; "they are short but massive and misshapen; not at all like you!"

"They are not true Picts," came the stern retort. "Look about you, Briton," with a wave of an arm, "you see the remnants of a vanishing race; a race that

once ruled Britain from sea to sea."

The Briton stared, bewildered.

"Harken, Briton," the voice continued; "harken, barbarian, while I tell to you the tale of the lost race."

The firelight flickered and danced, throwing vague reflections on the towering walls and on the rushing, silent current.

The ancient's voice echoed through the mighty cavern.

"Our people came from the south. Over the islands, over the Inland Sea. Over the snow-topped mountains, where some remained, to stay any enemies who might follow. Down into the fertile plains we came. Over all the land we spread. We became wealthy and prosperous. Then two kings arose in the land, and he who conquered, drove out the conquered. So many of us made boats and set sail for the far-off cliffs that gleamed white in the sunlight. We found a fair land with fertile plains. We found a race of red-haired barbarians, who dwelt in caves. Mighty giants, of great bodies and small minds.

"We built our huts of wattle. We tilled the soil. We cleared the forest. We drove the red-haired giants back into the forest. Farther we drove them back until at last they fled to the mountains of the west and the mountains of the north. We were rich. We were prosperous.

"Then," and his voice thrilled with rage and hate, until it seemed to reverberate through the cavern, "then the Celts came. From the isles of the west, in their rude coracles they came. In the west they landed, but they were not satisfied with the west. They marched eastward and seized the fertile plains. We fought. They were stronger. They were fierce fighters and they were armed with weapons of bronze, whereas we had only weapons of flint.

"We were driven out. They enslaved us. They drove us into the forest. Some of us fled into the mountains of the west. Many fled into the mountains of the north. There they mingled with the red-haired giants we drove out so long ago, and became a race of monstrous dwarfs, losing all the arts of peace and gaining only the ability to fight.

"But some of us swore that we would never leave the land we had fought for. But the Celts pressed us. There were many, and more came. So we took to caverns, to ravines, to caves. We, who had always dwelt in huts that let in much light, who had always tilled the soil, we learned to dwell like beasts, in

caves where no sunlight ever entered. Caves we found, of which this is the greatest; caves we made.

“You, Briton,” the voice became a shriek and a long arm was outstretched in accusation, “you and your race! You have made a free, prosperous nation into a race of earth-rats! We who never fled, who dwelt in the air and the sunlight close by the sea where traders came, we must flee like hunted beasts and burrow like moles! But at night! Ah, then for our vengeance! Then we slip from our hiding places, from our ravines and our caves, with torch and dagger! Look, Briton!”

And following the gesture, Cororuc saw a rounded post of some kind of very hard wood, set in a niche in the stone floor, close to the bank. The floor about the niche was charred as if by old fires.

Cororuc stared, uncomprehending. Indeed, he understood little of what had passed. That these people were even human, he was not at all certain. He had heard so much of them as “little people.” Tales of their doings, their hatred of the race of man, and their maliciousness flocked back to him. Little he knew that he was gazing on one of the mysteries of the ages. That the tales which the ancient Gaels told of the Picts, already warped, would become even more warped from age to age, to result in tales of elves, dwarfs, trolls and fairies, at first accepted and then rejected, entire, by the race of men, just as the Neandertal monsters resulted in tales of goblins and ogres. But of that Cororuc neither knew nor cared, and the ancient was speaking again.

“There, there, Briton,” exulted he, pointing to the post, “there you shall pay! A scant payment for the debt your race owes mine, but to the fullest of your extent.”

The old man’s exultation would have been fiendish, except for a certain high purpose in his face. He was sincere. He believed that he was only taking just vengeance; and he seemed like some great patriot for a mighty, lost cause.

“But I am a Briton!” stammered Cororuc. “It was not my people who drove your race into exile! They were Gaels, from Ireland. I am a Briton and my race came from Gallia only a hundred years ago. We conquered the Gaels and drove them into Erin, Wales and Caledonia, even as they drove your race.”

“No matter!” The ancient chief was on his feet. “A Celt is a Celt. Briton, or Gael, it makes no difference. Had it not been Gael, it would have been Briton. Every Celt who falls into our hands must pay, be it warrior or woman, babe or king. Seize him and bind him to the post.”

In an instant Cororuc was bound to the post, and he saw, with horror, the Picts piling firewood about his feet.

“And when you are sufficiently burned, Briton,” said the ancient, “this dagger that has drunk the blood of an hundred Britons, shall quench its thirst in yours.”

“But never have I harmed a Pict!” Cororuc gasped, struggling with his bonds.

“You pay, not for what you did, but for what your race has done,” answered the ancient sternly. “Well do I remember the deeds of the Celts when first they landed on Britain – the shrieks of the slaughtered, the screams of ravished girls, the smokes of burning villages, the plundering.”

Cororuc felt his short neck-hairs bristle. When first the Celts landed on Britain! That was over five hundred years ago!

And his Celtic curiosity would not let him keep still, even at the stake with the Picts preparing to light firewood piled about him.

“You could not remember that. That was ages ago.”

The ancient looked at him somberly. “And I am age-old. In my youth I was a witch-finder, and an old woman witch cursed me as she writhed at the stake. She said I should live until the last child of the Pictish race had passed. That I should see the once mighty nation go down into oblivion and then – and only then – should I follow it. For she put upon me the curse of life everlasting.”

Then his voice rose until it filled the cavern, “But the curse was nothing. Words can do no harm, can do nothing, to a man. I live. An hundred generations have I seen come and go, and yet another hundred. What is time? The sun rises and sets, and another day has passed into oblivion. Men watch the sun and set their lives by it. They league themselves on every hand with time. They count the minutes that race them into eternity. Man outlived the centuries ere he began to reckon time. Time is man-made. Eternity is the work of the gods. In this cavern there is no such thing as time. There are no stars, no sun. Without is time; within is eternity. We count not time. Nothing marks the speeding of the hours. The youths go forth. They see the sun, the stars. They reckon time. And they pass. I was a young man when I entered this cavern. I have never left it. As you reckon time, I may have dwelt here a thousand years; or an hour. When not banded by time, the soul, the mind, call it what you will, can conquer the body. And the wise men of the race, in my youth, knew more than the outer world will ever learn. When I feel that my

body begins to weaken, I take the magic draft, that is known only to me, of all the world. It does not give immortality; that is the work of the mind alone; but it rebuilds the body. The race of Picts vanish; they fade like the snow on the mountain. And when the last is gone, this dagger shall free me from the world." Then in a swift change of tone, "Light the fagots!"

Cororuc's mind was fairly reeling. He did not in the least understand what he had just heard. He was positive that he was going mad; and what he saw the next minute assured him of it.

Through the throng came a wolf: and he knew that it was the wolf whom he had rescued from the panther close by the ravine in the forest!

Strange, how long ago and far away that seemed! Yes, it was the same wolf. That same strange, shambling gait. Then the thing stood erect and raised its front feet to its head. What nameless horror was that?

Then the wolf's head fell back, disclosing a man's face. The face of a Pict; one of the first "werewolves." The man stepped out of the wolfskin and strode forward, calling something. A Pict just starting to light the wood about the Briton's feet drew back the torch and hesitated.

The wolf-Pict stepped forward and began to speak to the chief, using Celtic, evidently for the prisoner's benefit. (Cororuc was surprized to hear so many speak his language, not reflecting upon its comparative simplicity, and the ability of the Picts.)

"What is this?" asked the Pict who had played wolf. "A man is to be burned who should not be!"

"How?" exclaimed the old man fiercely, clutching his long beard. "Who are you to go against a custom of age-old antiquity?"

"I met a panther," answered the other, "and this Briton risked his life to save mine. Shall a Pict show ingratitude?"

And as the ancient hesitated, evidently pulled one way by his fanatical lust for revenge, and the other by his equally fierce racial pride, the Pict burst into a wild flight of oration, carried on in his own language. At last the ancient chief nodded.

"A Pict ever paid his debts," said he with impressive grandeur. "Never a Pict forgets. Unbind him. No Celt shall ever say that a Pict showed ingratitude."

Cororuc was released, and as, like a man in a daze, he tried to stammer his thanks, the chief waved them aside.

“A Pict never forgets a foe, ever remembers a friendly deed,” he replied.

“Come,” murmured his Pictish friend, tugging at the Celt’s arm.

He led the way into a cave leading away from the main cavern. As they went, Cororuc looked back, to see the ancient chief seated upon his stone throne, his eyes gleaming as he seemed to gaze back through the lost glories of the ages; on each hand the fires leaped and flickered. A figure of grandeur, the king of a lost race.

On and on Cororuc’s guide led him. And at last they emerged and the Briton saw the starlit sky above him.

“In that way is a village of your tribesmen,” said the Pict, pointing, “where you will find a welcome until you wish to take up your journey anew.”

And he pressed gifts on the Celt; gifts of garments of cloth and finely worked deerskin, beaded belts, a fine horn bow with arrows skilfully tipped with obsidian. Gifts of food. His own weapons were returned to him.

“But an instant,” said the Briton, as the Pict turned to go. “I followed your tracks in the forest. They vanished.” There was a question in his voice.

The Pict laughed softly, “I leaped into the branches of the tree. Had you looked up, you would have seen me. If ever you wish a friend, you will ever find one in Berula, chief among the Alban Picts.”

He turned and vanished. And Cororuc strode through the moonlight toward the Celtic village.

Poem

Previously published as ‘The Drums of Pictdom’

How can I wear the harness of toil

And sweat at the daily round,

While in my soul forever

The drums of Pictdom sound?

Miscellanea

Notes on Miscellanea

Two of Howard's stories of the Picts, written only about two years apart, present strikingly different conceptions of the eventual fate of the race. In *The Little People*, probably written in 1928, Howard suggests that "the legend is that these Picts, whom the Celts looked upon as scarcely human, fled to caverns under the earth and lived there, coming out only at night, when they would burn, murder, and carry off children for their bloody rites of worship." The story, clearly influenced by Arthur Machen's *The Shining Pyramid* (which itself serves as a plot device to set Howard's tale in motion), makes the Picts a race of underground dwellers with "stunted bodies, . . . gnarled limbs, . . . snake-like, beady eyes that stared unwinkingly, . . . grotesque, square faces with their unhuman features. . . ."

But in *The Children of the Night*, written about two years later, the author says that the Picts, as well as the Celts, despise these loathsome underground dwellers, now called *Children of the Night*. And to compound the problem, in *The People of the Dark*, written in 1931, Howard makes the linkage between *The Little People* and *The Children of the Night* explicit: they are both names for the same race of pre-Pictish inhabitants of the British Isles, driven underground and devolved to a state scarcely human. In both of these latter two stories, the 'Children' or 'Little People' are said to be descended from a 'Mongoloid' race that inhabited Europe before the coming of, first, the Picts,

and then the Celts.

Given the internal consistency in Howard's other tales of the Picts, this difference in relating their ultimate fate may strike the reader as odd. What happened is that, in August 1930, weird fictionist H. P. Lovecraft had written Howard a letter in which he expounded a theory, supposedly subscribed to by archaeologists, that the 'Mediterraneans' (Howard's 'Picts'), who spread over Europe and the British Isles before the coming of the Celts, were themselves preceded on the Continent by "the squat Mongoloids now represented by the Lapps," who, in the wake of conquest first by the Mediterraneans and then by 'Nordics,' "took to deep woods & caves, & survived for a long time as malignantly vindictive foes . . . sinking so low in the anthropological scale that they became bywords of dread and repulsion." Howard immediately adopted this idea.

In these stories, racial memory and ancient tribal hatreds play a prominent role. Without attempting to excuse this, we should understand the context in which these stories were created. Racialism, in the years before Hitler, was quite intellectually acceptable. Prominent scientists, naturalists, and philosophers promoted theories of racial differences that, generally, 'proved' the superiority of white Europeans, many going so far as to suggest that only whites were capable of cultural creation and innovation. Some went even further, and subdivided white Europeans into separate 'races,' to show that Northern Europeans (Aryans, or Nordics) were superior to Slavs (Alpines) and Southern Europeans (Mediterraneans). A focus of anthropology and archaeology was the idea of a *volk*, or ethnic/racial group, that had a unique language, used specific types of artifacts, and maintained an unique behavioral identity. Rooted in the nationalism prevalent at the time, these ideas were propounded by such eminent scholars as Gustaf Kossina and V. Gordon Childe. Social evolution was seen by these scholars as being due to a hazily defined 'racial/ethnic vigor,' intellectual and linguistic superiority, and hard work. 'Social Darwinism,' the idea that the theory of evolution applied to individuals and societies, as well as species, was in vogue, and 'survival of the fittest' meant that the most vigorous races would survive. Many writers undertook to warn the white race that they could not be complacent in the face of the rising power of the 'colored' world, lest they lose their favored position. It was the heyday of eugenics, the science dealing with the 'improving' of races through the control of genetic factors, to be accomplished by restrictions on reproduction among those with 'inferior' genes. The intelligence testing movement was gaining steam, using spurious (or simply fabricated) data to 'prove' that some races of mankind were more innately intelligent than others. Much of this pseudo-science, or selective

presentation of data in support of preconceived biases, was widely accepted at the time, and was used as evidence when the United States established strict immigration quotas in 1924, giving preference to Northern Europeans. Even scientists who disavowed racism and discrimination, such as Franz Boas (Howard's "Boaz"), still spent a great deal of time and effort in studying and attempting to isolate the physical characteristics of races.

Perhaps most importantly, for Robert E. Howard, one of his favorite writers, Jack London, promulgated many of these ideas in his work. Influenced by many of these prominent thinkers, such as Herbert Spencer (who coined the term 'survival of the fittest,' and from whose work Social Darwinism grew) and Ernst Haeckel (who first posited that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," that the biological development of the individual reproduces the evolutionary stages of its species, and who wrote that Negroes were "incapable of a true inner culture and of a higher mental development"), London was in his turn a profound influence on Howard. (In fact, in some of his letters Howard discusses Spencer and Haeckel, to whose ideas he may have been first introduced by London.)

In Howard's stories of racial memory, such as *The Little People* and *The Children of the Night*, can be clearly seen the strong influence of London's works, including *The Human Drift*, *Before Adam*, and perhaps most importantly, *The Star-Rover*, "a book that I've read and re-read for years, and that generally goes to my head like wine." The thousand-year-long treks, the superior Aryans or Nordics driving the "lesser breeds" before them, the "screaming primordial savagery," and the narrator who can vividly recall all his past incarnations, encoded as they are into his very genetic structure, "racial memories," all are borrowings from London, to which Howard adds a passionate intensity and story-telling verve all his own. The ideas may be rooted in discredited pseudo-science, but there's no denying the power of the stories.

Rusty Burke
2001

With thanks to Dr. Mark Hall

The Little People

[originally untitled]

The Little People

My sister threw down the book she was reading. To be exact, she threw it at me.

“Foolishness!” said she. “Fairy tales! Hand me that copy of Michael Arlen.”

I did so mechanically, glancing at the volume which had incurred her youthful displeasure. The story was “The Shining Pyramid” by Arthur Machen.

“My dear girl,” said I, “this is a masterpiece of outre literature.”

“Yes, but the idea!” she answered. “I outgrew fairy tales when I was ten.”

“This tale is not intended as an exponent of common-day realism,” I explained patiently.

“Too far-fetched,” she said with the finality of seventeen. “I like to read about things that could happen – who were ‘The Little People’ he speaks of, the same old elf and troll business?”

“All legends have a base of fact,” I said. “There is a reason – ”

“You mean to tell me such things actually existed?” she exclaimed. “Rot!”

“Not so fast, young lady,” I admonished, slightly nettled. “I mean that all myths had a concrete beginning which was later changed and twisted so as to take on a supernatural significance. Young people,” I continued, bending a brotherly frown on her pouting lips, “have a way of either accepting entirely or rejecting entirely such things as they do not understand. The ‘Little People’ spoken of by Machen are supposed to be descendants of the prehistoric people who inhabited Europe before the Celts came down out of the North.

“They are known variously as Turanians, Picts, Mediterraneans, and Garlic-eaters. A race of small, dark people, traces of their type may be found in primitive sections of Europe and Asia today, among the Basques of Spain, the Scotch of Galloway and the Lapps.

“They were workers in flint and are known to anthropologists as men of the Neolithic or polished stone age. Relics of their age show plainly that they had reached a comparatively high stage of primitive culture by the beginning of the bronze age, which was ushered in by the ancestors of the Celts – our

prehistoric tribesmen, young lady.

“These destroyed or enslaved the Mediterranean peoples and were in turn ousted by the Teutonic tribes. All over Europe, and especially in Britain, the legend is that these Picts, whom the Celts looked upon as scarcely human, fled to caverns under the earth and lived there, coming out only at night, when they would burn, murder, and carry off children for their bloody rites of worship. Doubtless there was much in this theory. Descendants of cave people, these fleeing dwarfs would no doubt take refuge in caverns and no doubt managed to live undiscovered for generations.”

“That was a long time ago,” she said with slight interest. “If there ever were any of those people they’re dead now. Why, we’re right in the country where they’re supposed to perform and haven’t seen any signs of them.”

I nodded. My sister Joan did not react to the weird West country as I did. The immense menhirs and cromlechs which rose starkly upon the moors seemed to bring back vague, racial memories, stirring my Celtic imagination.

“Maybe,” I said, adding unwisely, “You heard what that old villager said – the warning about walking on the fen at night. No one does it. You’re very sophisticated, young lady, but I’ll bet you wouldn’t spend a night alone in that stone ruin we can see from my window.”

Down came her book and her eyes sparkled with interest and combat.

“I’ll do it!” she exclaimed. “I’ll show you! He did say no-one would go near those old rocks at night, didn’t he? I will, and stay there the rest of the night!”

She was on her feet instantly and I saw I had made a mistake.

“No, you won’t, either,” I vetoed. “What would people think?”

“What do I care what they think?” she retorted in the up to date spirit of the Younger Generation.

“You haven’t any business out on the moors at night,” I answered. “Granting that these old myths are so much empty wind, there are plenty of shady characters who wouldn’t hesitate to harm a helpless girl. It’s not safe for a girl like you to be out unprotected.”

“You mean I’m too pretty?” she asked naively.

“I mean you’re too foolish,” I answered in my best older brother manner.

She made a face at me and was silent for a moment and I, who could read her agile mind with absurd ease, could tell by her pensive features and sparkling eyes exactly what she was thinking. She was mentally surrounded by a crowd of her cronies back home and I could guess the exact words which she was already framing: “My dears, I spent a whole night in the most romantic old ruin in West England which was supposed to be haunted – ”

I silently cursed myself for bringing the subject up when she said abruptly, “I’m going to do it, just the same. Nobody will harm me and I wouldn’t pass up the adventure for anything!”

“Joan,” I said, “I forbid you to go out alone tonight or any other night.”

Her eyes flashed and I instantly wished I had couched my command in more tactful language. My sister was willful and high spirited, used to having her way and very impatient of restraint.

“You can’t order me around,” she flamed. “You’ve done nothing but bully me ever since we left America.”

“It’s been necessary,” I sighed. “I can think of a number of pastimes more pleasant than touring Europe with a flapper sister.”

Her mouth opened as if to reply angrily then she shrugged her slim shoulders and settled back down in her chair, taking up a book.

“Alright, I didn’t want to go much anyhow,” she remarked casually. I eyed her suspiciously; she was not usually subdued so easily. In fact some of the most harrowing moments of my life have been those in which I was forced to cajole and coax her out of a rebellious mood.

Nor was my suspicion entirely vanquished when a few moments later she announced her intention of retiring and went to her room just across the corridor.

I turned out the light and stepped over to my window, which opened upon a wide view of the barren, undulating wastes of the moor. The moon was just rising and the land glimmered grisly and stark beneath its cold beams. It was late summer and the air was warm, yet the whole landscape *looked* cold, bleak and forbidding. Across the fen I saw rise, stark and shadowy, the rough and mighty spires of the ruins. Gaunt and terrible they loomed against the night,

silent phantoms from

[A page appears to be missing from Howard's typescript here.]

she assented with no enthusiasm and returned my kiss in a rather perfunctory manner. Compulsory obedience was repugnant.

I returned to my room and retired. Sleep did not come to me at once however, for I was hurt at my sister's evident resentment and I lay for a long time, brooding and staring at the window, now framed boldly in the molten silver of the moon. At length I dropped into a troubled slumber, through which flitted vague dreams wherein dim, ghostly shapes glided and leered.

I awoke suddenly, sat up and stared about me wildly, striving to orient my muddled senses. An oppressive feeling as of impending evil hovered about me. Fading swiftly as I came to full consciousness, lurked the eery remembrance of a hazy dream wherein a white fog had floated through the window and had assumed the shape of a tall, white bearded man who had shaken my shoulder as if to arouse me from sleep. All of us are familiar with the curious sensations of waking from a bad dream – the dimming and dwindling of partly remembered thoughts and feelings. But the wider awake I became, the stronger grew the suggestion of evil.

I sprang up, snatched on my clothing and rushed to my sister's room, flung open the door. The room was unoccupied.

I raced down the stair and accosted the night clerk who was maintained by the small hotel for some obscure reason.

"Miss Costigan, sir? She came down, clad for outdoors, a while after midnight – about half an hour ago, sir, and said she was going to take a stroll on the moor and not to be alarmed if she did not return at once, sir."

I hurled out of the hotel, my pulse pounding a devil's tattoo. Far out across the fen I saw the ruins, bold and grim against the moon, and in that direction I hastened. At length – it seemed hours – I saw a slim figure some distance in front of me. The girl was taking her time and in spite of her start of me, I was gaining – soon I would be within hearing distance. My breath was already coming in gasps from my exertions but I quickened my pace.

The aura of the fen was like a tangible something, pressing upon me, weighting my limbs – and always that presentiment of evil grew and grew.

Then, far ahead of me, I saw my sister stop suddenly, and look about her confusedly. The moonlight flung a veil of illusion – I could see her but I could not see what had caused her sudden terror. I broke into a run, my blood leaping wildly and suddenly freezing as a wild, despairing scream burst out and sent the moor echoes flying.

The girl was turning first one way and then another and I screamed for her to run toward me; she heard me and started toward me running like a frightened antelope and then I *saw*. Vague shadows darted about her – short, dwarfish shapes – just in front of me rose a solid wall of them and I saw that they had blocked her from gaining to me. Suddenly, instinctively I believe, she turned and raced for the stone columns, the whole horde after her, save those who remained to bar my path.

I had no weapon nor did I feel the need of any; a strong, athletic youth, I was in addition an amateur boxer of ability, with a terrific punch in either hand. Now all the primal instincts surged redly within me; I was a cave man bent on vengeance against a tribe who sought to steal a woman of my family. I did not fear – I only wished to close with them. Aye, I recognized these – I knew them of old and all the old wars rose and roared within the misty caverns of my soul. Hate leaped in me as in the old days when men of my blood came from the North. Aye, though the whole spawn of Hell rise up from those caverns which honeycomb the moors.

Now I was almost upon those who barred my way; I saw plainly the stunted bodies, the gnarled limbs, the snake-like, beady eyes that stared unwinkingly, the grotesque, square faces with their unhuman features, the shimmer of flint daggers in their crooked hands. Then with a tigerish leap I was among them like a leopard among jackals and details were blotted out in a whirling red haze. Whatever they were, they were of living substance; features crumpled and bones shattered beneath my flailing fists and blood darkened the moon-silvered stones. A flint dagger sank hilt deep in my thigh. Then the ghastly throng broke each way and fled before me, as their ancestors fled before mine, leaving four silent dwarfish shapes stretched on the moor.

Heedless of my wounded leg, I took up the grim race anew; Joan had reached the druidic ruins now and she leaned against one of the columns, exhausted, blindly seeking there protection in obedience to some dim instinct just as women of her blood had done in bygone ages.

The horrid things that pursued her were closing in upon her. They would reach her before I. God knows the thing was horrible enough but back in the

recesses of my mind, grimmer horrors were whispering; dream memories wherein stunted creatures pursued white limbed women across such fens as these. Lurking memories of the ages when dawns were young and men struggled with forces which were not of men.

The girl toppled forward in a faint, and lay at the foot of the towering column in a piteous white heap. And they closed in – closed in. What they would do I knew not but the ghosts of ancient memory whispered that they would do Something of hideous evil, something foul and grim.

From my lips burst a scream, wild and inarticulate, born of sheer elemental horror and despair. I could not reach her before those fiends had worked their frightful will upon her. The centuries, the ages swept back. This was as it had been in the beginning. And what followed, I know not how to explain – but I think that that wild shriek whispered back down the long reaches of Time to the Beings my ancestors worshipped and that blood answered blood. Aye, such a shriek as could echo down the dusty corridors of lost ages and bring back from the whispering abyss of Eternity the ghost of the only one who could save a girl of Celtic blood.

The foremost of the Things were almost upon the prostrate girl; their hands were clutching for her, when suddenly beside her a form stood. There was no gradual materializing. The figure leaped suddenly into being, etched bold and clear in the moonlight. A tall white bearded man, clad in long robes – the man I had seen in my dream! A druid, answering once more the desperate need of people of his race. His brow was high and noble, his eyes mystic and far-seeing – so much I could see, even from where I ran. His arm rose in an imperious gesture and the Things shrank back – back – back – They broke and fled, vanishing suddenly, and I sank to my knees beside my sister, gathering the child into my arms. A moment I looked up at the man, sword and shield against the powers of darkness, protecting helpless tribes as in the world's youth, who raised his hand above us as if in benediction, then he too vanished suddenly and the moor lay bare and silent.

The Little People

Typescript

This manuscript was probably written about 1928. It is unusual in that it

contains a number of hand-written corrections and additions; Howard usually either simply retyped the story, or made his corrections and additions with the typewriter. At least one page is missing from the middle of the manuscript.

The Children of the Night

The Children of the Night

There were, I remember, six of us in Conrad's bizarrely fashioned study, with its queer relics from all over the world and its long rows of books which ranged from the Mandrake Press edition of Boccaccio to a *Missale Romanum*, bound in clasped oak boards and printed in Venice, 1740. Clemants and Professor Kirowan had just engaged in a somewhat testy anthropological argument: Clemants upholding the theory of a separate, distinct Alpine race, while the professor maintained that this so-called race was merely a deviation from an original Aryan stock – possibly the result of an admixture between the southern or Mediterranean races and the Nordic people.

"And how," asked Clemants, "do you account for their brachycephalicism? The Mediterraneans were as long-headed as the Aryans: would admixture between these dolichocephalic peoples produce a broad-headed intermediate type?"

"Special conditions might bring about a change in an originally long-headed race," snapped Kirowan. "Boaz has demonstrated, for instance, that in the case of immigrants to America, skull formations often change in one generation. And Flinders Petrie has shown that the Lombards changed from a long-headed to a round-headed race in a few centuries."

"But what caused these changes?"

“Much is yet unknown to science,” answered Kirowan, “and we need not be dogmatic. No one knows, as yet, why people of British and Irish ancestry tend to grow unusually tall in the Darling district of Australia – Cornstalks, as they are called – or why people of such descent generally have thinner jaw-structures after a few generations in New England. The universe is full of the unexplainable.”

“And therefore the uninteresting, according to Machen,” laughed Taverel.

Conrad shook his head. “I must disagree. To me the unknowable is most tantalizingly fascinating.”

“Which accounts, no doubt, for all the works on witchcraft and demonology I see on your shelves,” said Ketrick, with a wave of his hand toward the rows of books.

And let me speak of Ketrick. Each of the six of us was of the same breed – that is to say, a Briton or an American of British descent. By British, I include all natural inhabitants of the British Isles. We represented various strains of English and Celtic blood, but basically, these strains are the same after all. But Ketrick: to me the man always seemed strangely alien. It was in his eyes that this difference showed externally. They were a sort of amber, almost yellow, and slightly oblique. At times, when one looked at his face from certain angles, they seemed to slant like a Chinaman’s.

Others than I had noticed this feature, so unusual in a man of pure Anglo-Saxon descent. The usual myths ascribing his slanted eyes to some pre-natal influence had been mooted about, and I remember Professor Hendrik Brooler once remarked that Ketrick was undoubtedly an atavism, representing a reversion of type to some dim and distant ancestor of Mongolian blood – a sort of freak reversion, since none of his family showed such traces.

But Ketrick comes of the Welsh branch of the Cetrics of Sussex, and his lineage is set down in the *Book of Peers*. There you may read the line of his ancestry, which extends unbroken to the days of Canute. No slightest trace of Mongoloid intermixture appears in the genealogy, and how could there have been such intermixture in old Saxon England? For Ketrick is the modern form of Cedric, and though that branch fled into Wales before the invasion of the Danes, its male heirs consistently married with English families on the border marches, and it remains a pure line of the powerful Sussex Cetrics – almost pure Saxon. As for the man himself, this defect of his eyes, if it can be called a defect, is his only abnormality, except for a slight and occasional lisping of speech. He is highly intellectual and a good companion except for a slight

aloofness and a rather callous indifference which may serve to mask an extremely sensitive nature.

Referring to his remark, I said with a laugh: “Conrad pursues the obscure and mystic as some men pursue romance; his shelves throng with delightful nightmares of every variety.”

Our host nodded. “You’ll find there a number of delectable dishes – Machen, Poe, Blackwood, Maturin – look, there’s a rare feast – *Horrid Mysteries*, by the Marquis of Grosse – the real Eighteenth Century edition.”

Taverel scanned the shelves. “Weird fiction seems to vie with works on witchcraft, voodoo and dark magic.”

“True; historians and chroniclers are often dull; tale-weavers never – the masters, I mean. A voodoo sacrifice can be described in such a dull manner as to take all the real fantasy out of it, and leave it merely a sordid murder. I will admit that few writers of fiction touch the true heights of horror – most of their stuff is too concrete, given too much earthly shape and dimensions. But in such tales as Poe’s *Fall of the House of Usher*, Machen’s *Black Seal* and Lovecraft’s *Call of Cthulhu* – the three master horror-tales, to my mind – the reader is borne into dark and *outer* realms of imagination.

“But look there,” he continued, “there, sandwiched between that nightmare of Huysmans’, and Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* – Von Junzt’s *Nameless Cults*. There’s a book to keep you awake at night!”

“I’ve read it,” said Taverel, “and I’m convinced the man is mad. His work is like the conversation of a maniac – it runs with startling clarity for awhile, then suddenly merges into vagueness and disconnected ramblings.”

Conrad shook his head. “Have you ever thought that perhaps it is his very sanity that causes him to write in that fashion? What if he dares not put on paper all he knows? What if his vague suppositions are dark and mysterious hints, keys to the puzzle, to those who know?”

“Bosh!” This from Kirowan. “Are you intimating that any of the nightmare cults referred to by Von Junzt survive to this day – if they ever existed save in the hag-ridden brain of a lunatic poet and philosopher?”

“Not he alone used hidden meanings,” answered Conrad. “If you will scan various works of certain great poets you may find double meanings. Men have stumbled on to cosmic secrets in the past and given a hint of them to the

world in cryptic words. Do you remember Von Junzt's hints of 'a city in the waste'? What do you think of Flecker's lines:

> "'Pass not beneath! Men say there blows in stony deserts still a rose
>
> "'But with no scarlet to her leaf – and from whose heart no perfume flows.'

"Men may stumble upon secret things, but Von Junzt dipped deep into forbidden mysteries. He was one of the few men, for instance, who could read the *Necronomicon* in the original Greek translation."

Taverel shrugged his shoulders, and Professor Kirowan, though he snorted and puffed viciously at his pipe, made no direct reply; for he, as well as Conrad, had delved into the Latin version of the book, and had found there things not even a cold-blooded scientist could answer or refute.

"Well," he said presently, "suppose we admit the former existence of cults revolving about such nameless and ghastly gods and entities as Cthulhu, Yog Sothoth, Tsathoggua, Gol-goroth, and the like, I can not find it in my mind to believe that survivals of such cults lurk in the dark corners of the world today."

To our surprize Clemants answered. He was a tall, lean man, silent almost to the point of taciturnity, and his fierce struggles with poverty in his youth had lined his face beyond his years. Like many another artist, he lived a distinctly dual literary life, his swashbuckling novels furnishing him a generous income, and his editorial position on *The Cloven Hoof* affording him full artistic expression. *The Cloven Hoof* was a poetry magazine whose bizarre contents had often aroused the shocked interest of the conservative critics.

"You remember Von Junzt makes mention of a so-called Bran cult," said Clemants, stuffing his pipe-bowl with a peculiarly villainous brand of shag tobacco. "I think I heard you and Taverel discussing it once."

"As I gather from his hints," snapped Kirowan, "Von Junzt includes this particular cult among those still in existence. Absurd."

Again Clemants shook his head. "When I was a boy working my way through

a certain university, I had for roommate a lad as poor and ambitious as I. If I told you his name, it would startle you. Though he came of an old Scotch line of Galloway, he was obviously of a non-Aryan type.

“This is in strictest confidence, you understand. But my roommate talked in his sleep. I began to listen and put his disjointed mumbling together. And in his mutterings I first heard of the ancient cult hinted at by Von Junzt; of the king who ruled the Dark Empire, which was a revival of an older, darker empire dating back into the Stone Age; and of the great, nameless cavern where stands the Dark Man – the image of Bran Mak Morn, carved in his likeness by a master-hand while the great king yet lived, and to which each worshipper of Bran makes a pilgrimage once in his or her lifetime. Yes, that cult lives today in the descendants of Bran’s people – a silent, unknown current it flows on in the great ocean of life, waiting for the stone image of the great Bran to breathe and move with sudden life, and come from the great cavern to rebuild their lost empire.”

“And who were the people of that empire?” asked Ketrick.

“Picts,” answered Taverel, “doubtless the people known later as the wild Picts of Galloway were predominantly Celtic – a mixture of Gaelic, Cymric, aboriginal and possibly Teutonic elements. Whether they took their name from the older race or lent their own name to that race, is a matter yet to be decided. But when Von Junzt speaks of Picts, he refers specifically to the small, dark, garlic-eating peoples of Mediterranean blood who brought the Neolithic culture into Britain. The first settlers of that country, in fact, who gave rise to the tales of earth spirits and goblins.”

“I can not agree to that last statement,” said Conrad. “These legends ascribe a deformity and inhumanness of appearances to the characters. There was nothing about the Picts to excite such horror and repulsion in the Aryan peoples. I believe that the Mediterraneans were preceded by a Mongoloid type, very low in the scale of development, whence these tales — ”

“Quite true,” broke in Kirowan, “but I hardly think they preceded the Picts, as you call them, into Britain. We find troll and dwarf legends all over the Continent, and I am inclined to think that both the Mediterranean and Aryan peoples brought these tales with them from the Continent. They must have been of extremely inhuman aspect, those early Mongoloids.”

“At least,” said Conrad, “here is a flint mallet a miner found in the Welsh hills and gave to me, which has never been fully explained. It is obviously of no ordinary Neolithic make. See how small it is, compared to most implements

of that age; almost like a child's toy; yet it is surprizingly heavy and no doubt a deadly blow could be dealt with it. I fitted the handle to it, myself, and you would be surprised to know how difficult it was to carve it into a shape and balance corresponding with the head."

We looked at the thing. It was well made, polished somewhat like the other remnants of the Neolithic I had seen, yet as Conrad said, it was strangely different. Its small size was oddly disquieting, for it had no appearance of a toy, otherwise. It was as sinister in suggestion as an Aztec sacrificial dagger. Conrad had fashioned the oaken handle with rare skill, and in carving it to fit the head, had managed to give it the same unnatural appearance as the mallet itself had. He had even copied the workmanship of primal times, fixing the head into the cleft of the haft with rawhide.

"My word!" Taverel made a clumsy pass at an imaginary antagonist and nearly shattered a costly Shang vase. "The balance of the thing is all off center; I'd have to readjust all my mechanics of poise and equilibrium to handle it."

"Let me see it," Ketrick took the thing and fumbled with it, trying to strike the secret of its proper handling. At length, somewhat irritated, he swung it up and struck a heavy blow at a shield which hung on the wall near by. I was standing near it; I saw the hellish mallet twist in his hand like a live serpent, and his arm wrenched out of line; I heard a shout of alarmed warning – then darkness came with the impact of the mallet against my head.

Slowly I drifted back to consciousness. First there was dull sensation with blindness and total lack of knowledge as to where I was or what I was; then vague realization of life and being, and a hard something pressing into my ribs. Then the mists cleared and I came to myself completely.

I lay on my back half beneath some underbrush and my head throbbed fiercely. Also my hair was caked and clotted with blood, for the scalp had been laid open. But my eyes traveled down my body and limbs, naked but for a deerskin loin-cloth and sandals of the same material, and found no other wound. That which pressed so uncomfortably into my ribs was my ax, on which I had fallen.

Now an abhorrent babble reached my ears and stung me into clear consciousness. The noise was faintly like language, but not such language as men are accustomed to. It sounded much like the repeated hissing of many great snakes.

I stared. I lay in a great, gloomy forest. The glade was overshadowed, so that even in the daytime it was very dark. Aye – that forest was dark, cold, silent, gigantic and utterly grisly. And I looked into the glade.

I saw a shambles. Five men lay there – at least, what had been five men. Now as I marked the abhorrent mutilations my soul sickened. And about them clustered the – Things. Humans they were, of a sort, though I did not consider them so. They were short and stocky, with broad heads too large for their scrawny bodies. Their hair was snaky and stringy, their faces broad and square, with flat noses, hideously slanted eyes, a thin gash for a mouth, and pointed ears. They wore the skins of beasts, as did I, but these hides were but crudely dressed. They bore small bows and flint-tipped arrows, flint knives and cudgels. And they conversed in a speech as hideous as themselves, a hissing, reptilian speech that filled me with dread and loathing.

Oh, I hated them as I lay there; my brain flamed with white-hot fury. And now I remembered. We had hunted, we six youths of the Sword People, and had wandered far into that grim forest which our people generally shunned. Weary of the chase, we had paused to rest; to me had been given the first watch, for in those days, no sleep was safe without a sentry. Now shame and revulsion shook my whole being. I had slept – I had betrayed my comrades. And now they lay gashed and mangled – butchered while they slept, by vermin who had never dared to stand before them on equal terms. I, Aryara, had betrayed my trust.

Aye – I remembered. I had slept and in the midst of a dream of the hunt, fire and sparks had exploded in my head and I had plunged into a deeper darkness where there were no dreams. And now the penalty. They who had stolen through the dense forest and smitten me senseless, had not paused to mutilate me. Thinking me dead they had hastened swiftly to their grisly work. Now perhaps they had forgotten me for a time. I had sat somewhat apart from the others, and when struck, had fallen half under some bushes. But soon they would remember me. I would hunt no more, dance no more in the dances of hunt and love and war, see no more the wattle huts of the Sword People.

But I had no wish to escape back to my people. Should I slink back with my tale of infamy and disgrace? Should I hear the words of scorn my tribe would fling at me, see the girls point their contemptuous fingers at the youth who slept and betrayed his comrades to the knives of vermin?

Tears stung my eyes, and slow hate heaved up in my bosom, and my brain. I would never bear the sword that marked the warrior. I would never triumph

over worthy foes and die gloriously beneath the arrows of the Picts or the axes of the Wolf People or the River People. I would go down to death beneath a nauseous rabble, whom the Picts had long ago driven into forest dens like rats.

And mad rage gripped me and dried my tears, giving in their stead a berserk blaze of wrath. If such reptiles were to bring about my downfall, I would make it a fall long remembered – if such beasts had memories.

Moving cautiously, I shifted until my hand was on the haft of my ax; then I called on Il-marinen and bounded up as a tiger springs. And as a tiger springs I was among my enemies and smashed a flat skull as a man crushes the head of a snake. A sudden wild clamor of fear broke from my victims and for an instant they closed round me, hacking and stabbing. A knife gashed my chest but I gave no heed. A red mist waved before my eyes, and my body and limbs moved in perfect accord with my fighting brain. Snarling, hacking and smiting, I was a tiger among reptiles. In an instant they gave way and fled, leaving me bestriding half a dozen stunted bodies. But I was not satiated.

I was close on the heels of the tallest one, whose head would perhaps come to my shoulder, and who seemed to be their chief. He fled down a sort of runway, squealing like a monstrous lizard, and when I was close at his shoulder, he dived, snake-like, into the bushes. But I was too swift for him, and I dragged him forth and butchered him in a most gory fashion.

And through the bushes I saw the trail he was striving to reach – a path winding in and out among the trees, almost too narrow to allow the traversing of it by a man of normal size. I hacked off my victim’s hideous head, and carrying it in my left hand, went up the serpent-path, with my red ax in my right.

Now as I strode swiftly along the path and blood splashed beside my feet at every step from the severed jugular of my foe, I thought of those I hunted. Aye – we held them in so little esteem, we hunted by day in the forest they haunted. What they called themselves, we never knew; for none of our tribe ever learned the accursed hissing sibilances they used as speech; but we called them the Children of the Night. And night-things they were indeed, for they slunk in the depths of the dark forests, and in subterraneous dwellings, venturing forth into the hills only when their conquerors slept. It was at night that they did their foul deeds – the quick flight of a flint-tipped arrow to slay cattle, or perhaps a loitering human, the snatching of a child that had wandered from the village.

But it was for more than this we gave them their name; they were, in truth, people of night and darkness and the ancient horror-ridden shadows of bygone ages. For these creatures were very old, and they represented an outworn age. They had once overrun and possessed this land, and they had been driven into hiding and obscurity by the dark, fierce little Picts with whom we contested now, and who hated and loathed them as savagely as did we.

The Picts were different from us in general appearance, being shorter of stature and dark of hair, eyes and skin, whereas we were tall and powerful, with yellow hair and light eyes. But they were cast in the same mold, for all of that. These Children of the Night seemed not human to us, with their deformed dwarfish bodies, yellow skin and hideous faces. Aye – they were reptiles – vermin.

And my brain was like to burst with fury when I thought that it was these vermin on whom I was to glut my ax and perish. Bah! There is no glory slaying snakes or dying from their bites. All this rage and fierce disappointment turned on the objects of my hatred, and with the old red mist waving in front of me I swore by all the gods I knew, to wreak such red havoc before I died as to leave a dread memory in the minds of the survivors.

My people would not honor me, in such contempt they held the Children. But those Children that I left alive would remember me and shudder. So I swore, gripping savagely my ax, which was of bronze, set in a cleft of the oaken haft and fastened securely with rawhide.

Now I heard ahead a sibilant, abhorrent murmur, and a vile stench filtered to me through the trees, human, yet less than human. A few moments more and I emerged from the deep shadows into a wide open space. I had never before seen a village of the Children. There was a cluster of earthen domes, with low doorways sunk into the ground; squalid dwelling-places, half above and half below the earth. And I knew from the talk of the old warriors that these dwelling-places were connected by underground corridors, so the whole village was like an ant-bed, or a system of snake holes. And I wondered if other tunnels did not run off under the ground and emerge long distances from the villages.

Before the domes clustered a vast group of the creatures, hissing and jabbering at a great rate.

I had quickened my pace, and now as I burst from cover, I was running with the fleetness of my race. A wild clamor went up from the rabble as they saw

the avenger, tall, blood-stained and blazing-eyed leap from the forest, and I cried out fiercely, flung the dripping head among them and bounded like a wounded tiger into the thick of them.

Oh, there was no escape for them now! They might have taken to their tunnels but I would have followed, even to the guts of hell. They knew they must slay me, and they closed around, a hundred strong, to do it.

There was no wild blaze of glory in my brain as there had been against worthy foes. But the old berserk madness of my race was in my blood and the smell of blood and destruction in my nostrils.

I know not how many I slew. I only know that they thronged about me in a writhing, slashing mass, like serpents about a wolf, and I smote until the ax-edge turned and bent and the ax became no more than a bludgeon; and I smashed skulls, split heads, splintered bones, scattered blood and brains in one red sacrifice to Il-marinen, god of the Sword People.

Bleeding from half a hundred wounds, blinded by a slash across the eyes, I felt a flint knife sink deep into my groin and at the same instant a cudgel laid my scalp open. I went to my knees but reeled up again, and saw in a thick red fog a ring of leering, slant-eyed faces. I lashed out as a dying tiger strikes, and the faces broke in red ruin.

And as I sagged, overbalanced by the fury of my stroke, a taloned hand clutched my throat and a flint blade was driven into my ribs and twisted venomously. Beneath a shower of blows I went down again, but the man with the knife was beneath me, and with my left hand I found him and broke his neck before he could writhe away.

Life was waning swiftly; through the hissing and howling of the Children I could hear the voice of Il-marinen. Yet once again I rose stubbornly, through a very whirlwind of cudgels and spears. I could no longer see my foes, even in a red mist. But I could feel their blows and knew they surged about me. I braced my feet, gripped my slippery ax-haft with both hands, and calling once more on Il-marinen I heaved up the ax and struck one last terrific blow. And I must have died on my feet, for there was no sensation of falling; even as I knew, with a last thrill of savagery, that I slew, even as I felt the splintering of skulls beneath my ax, darkness came with oblivion.

I came suddenly to myself. I was half reclining in a big armchair and Conrad was pouring water on me. My head ached and a trickle of blood had half dried on my face. Kirowan, Taverel and Clemants were hovering about, anxiously,

while Ketrick stood just in front of me, still holding the mallet, his face schooled to a polite perturbation which his eyes did not show. And at the sight of those cursed eyes a red madness surged up in me.

“There,” Conrad was saying, “I told you he’d come out of it in a moment; just a light crack. He’s taken harder than that. All right now, aren’t you, O’Donnel?”

At that I swept them aside, and with a single low snarl of hatred launched myself at Ketrick. Taken utterly by surprize he had no opportunity to defend himself. My hands locked on his throat and we crashed together on the ruins of a divan. The others cried out in amazement and horror and sprang to separate us – or rather, to tear me from my victim, for already Ketrick’s slant eyes were beginning to start from their sockets.

“For God’s sake, O’Donnel,” exclaimed Conrad, seeking to break my grip, “what’s come over you? Ketrick didn’t mean to hit you – let go, you idiot!”

A fierce wrath almost overcame me at these men who were my friends, men of my own tribe, and I swore at them and their blindness, as they finally managed to tear my strangling fingers from Ketrick’s throat. He sat up and choked and explored the blue marks my fingers had left, while I raged and cursed, nearly defeating the combined efforts of the four to hold me.

“You fools!” I screamed. “Let me go! Let me do my duty as a tribesman! You blind fools! I care nothing for the paltry blow he dealt me – he and his dealt stronger blows than that against me, in bygone ages. You fools, he is marked with the brand of the beast – the reptile – the vermin we exterminated centuries ago! I must crush him, stamp him out, rid the clean earth of his accursed pollution!”

So I raved and struggled, and Conrad gasped to Ketrick over his shoulder: “Get out, quick! He’s out of his head! His mind is unhinged! Get away from him.”

Now I look out over the ancient dreaming downs and the hills and deep forests beyond and I ponder. Somehow, that blow from that ancient accursed mallet knocked me back into another age and another life. While I was Aryara I had no cognizance of any other life. It was no dream; it was a stray bit of reality wherein I, John O’Donnel, once lived and died, and back into which I was snatched across the voids of time and space by a chance blow. Time and times are but cogwheels, unmatched, grinding on oblivious to one another. Occasionally – oh, very rarely! – the cogs fit; the pieces of the plot snap

together momentarily and give men faint glimpses beyond the veil of this everyday blindness we call reality.

I am John O'Donnel and I was Aryara, who dreamed dreams of war-glory and hunt-glory and feast-glory and who died on a red heap of his victims in some lost age. But in what age and where?

The last I can answer for you. Mountains and rivers change their contours; the landscapes alter; but the downs least of all. I look out upon them now and I remember them, not only with John O'Donnel's eyes, but with the eyes of Aryara. They are but little changed. Only the great forest has shrunk and dwindled and in many, many places vanished utterly. But here on these very downs Aryara lived and fought and loved and in yonder forest he died. Kirowan was wrong. The little, fierce, dark Picts were not the first men in the Isles. There were beings before them – aye, the Children of the Night. Legends – why, the Children were not unknown to us when we came into what is now the isle of Britain. We had encountered them before, ages before. Already we had our myths of them. But we found them in Britain. Nor had the Picts totally exterminated them.

Nor had the Picts, as so many believe, preceded us by many centuries. We drove them before us as we came, in that long drift from the East. I, Aryara, knew old men who had marched on that century-long trek; who had been borne in the arms of yellow-haired women over countless miles of forest and plain, and who as youths had walked in the vanguard of the invaders.

As to the age – that I can not say. But I, Aryara, was surely an Aryan and my people were Aryans – members of one of the thousand unknown and unrecorded drifts that scattered yellow-haired, blue-eyed tribes all over the world. The Celts were not the first to come into western Europe. I, Aryara, was of the same blood and appearance as the men who sacked Rome, but mine was a much older strain. Of the language I spoke, no echo remains in the waking mind of John O'Donnel, but I knew that Aryara's tongue was to ancient Celtic what ancient Celtic is to modern Gaelic.

Il-marinen! I remember the god I called upon, the ancient, ancient god who worked in metals – in bronze then. For Il-marinen was one of the base gods of the Aryans from whom many gods grew; and he was Wieland and Vulcan in the ages of iron. But to Aryara he was Il-marinen.

And Aryara – he was one of many tribes and many drifts. Not alone did the Sword People come or dwell in Britain. The River People were before us and the Wolf People came later. But they were Aryans like us, light-eyed and tall

and blond. We fought them, for the reason that the various drifts of Aryans have always fought each other, just as the Achaeans fought the Dorians, just as the Celts and Germans cut each other's throats; aye, just as the Hellenes and the Persians, who were once one people and of the same drift, split in two different ways on the long trek and centuries later met and flooded Greece and Asia Minor with blood.

Now understand, all this I did not know as Aryara. I, Aryara, knew nothing of all these world-wide drifts of my race. I knew only that my people were conquerors, that a century ago my ancestors had dwelt in the great plains far to the east, plains populous with fierce, yellow-haired, light-eyed people like myself; that my ancestors had come westward in a great drift; and that in that drift, when my tribesmen met tribes of other races, they trampled and destroyed them, and when they met other yellow-haired, light-eyed people, of older or newer drifts, they fought savagely and mercilessly, according to the old, illogical custom of the Aryan people. This Aryara knew, and I, John O'Donnel, who know much more and much less than I, Aryara, knew, have combined the knowledge of these separate selves and have come to conclusions that would startle many noted scientists and historians.

Yet this fact is well known: Aryans deteriorate swiftly in sedentary and peaceful life. Their proper existence is a nomadic one; when they settle down to an agricultural existence, they pave the way for their downfall; and when they pen themselves in with city walls, they seal their doom. Why, I, Aryara, remember the tales of the old men – how the Sons of the Sword, on that long drift, found villages of white-skinned, yellow-haired people who had drifted into the west centuries before and had quit the wandering life to dwell among the dark, garlic-eating people and gain their sustenance from the soil. And the old men told how soft and weak they were, and how easily they fell before the bronze blades of the Sword People.

Look – is not the whole history of the Sons of Aryan laid on those lines? Look – how swiftly has Persian followed Mede; Greek, Persian; Roman, Greek; and German, Roman. Aye, and the Norsemen followed the Germanic tribes when they had grown flabby from a century or so of peace and idleness, and despoiled the spoils they had taken in the southland.

But let me speak of Ketrick. Ha – the short hairs at the back of my neck bristle at the very mention of his name. An atavism – aye! A reversion to type – but not to the type of some cleanly Chinaman or Mongol of recent times. The Danes drove his ancestors into the hills of Wales; and there, in what mediaeval century, and in what foul way did that cursed aboriginal taint creep

into the clean Saxon blood of the Celtic line, there to lie dormant so long? The Celtic Welsh never mated with the Children any more than the Picts did. But there must have been survivals – vermin lurking in those grim hills, that had outlasted their time and age. In Aryara's day they were scarcely human. What must a thousand years of retrogression have done to the breed?

What foul shape stole into the Ketrick castle on some forgotten night, or rose out of the dusk to grip some woman of the line, straying in the hills?

The mind shrinks from such an image. But this I know: there must have been survivals of that foul, reptilian epoch when the Ketricks went into Wales. There still may be. But this changeling, this waif of darkness, this horror who bears the noble name of Ketrick, the brand of the serpent is upon him, and until he is destroyed there is no rest for me. Now that I know him for what he is, he pollutes the clean air and leaves the slime of the snake on the green earth. The sound of his lisping, hissing voice fills me with crawling horror and the sight of his slanted eyes inspires me with madness.

For I come of a royal race, and such as he is a continual insult and a threat, like a serpent under foot. Mine is a regal race, though now it is become degraded and falls into decay by continual admixture with conquered races. The waves of alien blood have washed my hair black and my skin dark, but I still have the lordly stature and the blue eyes of a royal Aryan.

And as my ancestors – as I, Aryara, destroyed the scum that writhed beneath our heels, so shall I, John O'Donnel, exterminate the reptilian thing, the monster bred of the snaky taint that slumbered so long unguessed in clean Saxon veins, the vestigial serpent-things left to taunt the Sons of Aryan. They say the blow I received affected my mind; I know it but opened my eyes. Mine ancient enemy walks often on the moors alone, attracted, though he may not know it, by ancestral urgings. And on one of these lonely walks I shall meet him, and when I meet him, I will break his foul neck with my hands, as I, Aryara, broke the necks of foul night-things in the long, long ago.

Then they may take me and break my neck at the end of a rope if they will. I am not blind, if my friends are. And in the sight of the old Aryan god, if not in the blinded eyes of men, I will have kept faith with my tribe.

Bran Mak Morn

Bran Mak Morn

ACT I SCENE I

SCENE. *A high, flat ledge just over a waterfall. Bran Mak Morn is pacing to and fro. Dubthak enters the scene.*

BRAN: Ah, Dubthak, bring you tidings of Conmac the Red that you come so fast? You seem breathless.

DUBTHAK: I came in haste to tell you of my news ere it reached your ears garbled by ignorant tongues. As for Conmac he may be in the midst of the Baltic or sailing up the Thames or in Hades for all I know. My tidings concern him not.

BRAN: What then?

DUBTHAK: Why, this. You know that five days since I took a band of three-score warriors to the Forth, thinking to surprise Ingall the Rover in the bay?

BRAN: Yes.

DUBTHAK: Well either, we marched too slow or Ingall got word of our coming or the foul fiend took a hand for just as we topped Mount Arsa we saw his sail beating out to sea. So there was nothing to do but to turn and march back. But fortune favored us after all for on our return we surprized a Celtic village and put it to the sword. The loot was scant but we took two-score slaves. As fair youths and maidens as ever you laid eyes upon.

BRAN: What of the men?

DUBTHAK: No men survived the raid except for some that were out hunting and a few that fled.

BRAN. Dubthak, these massacres must cease. I have warned you –,

DUBTHAK: A score of times my chief. But when the torch is lit and the blade bared only you can restrain the warriors. I could not, even if I so desired, which I do not. I have no love for the Scots or Britons either.

BRAN. Well, bring the prisoners before me.

Exit Dubthak.

Still murder, fire and rapine. My Picts are wild and impatient of restraint. Some day it may be that they will turn against even me. A hard, thank-less task it is to raise the Pict nation out of savagery and bring it back to the civilization of our fathers. Of the age of Brennus. The Picts are savages. I must make them civilized. They are wolves and I must make them men. Can one man do it? I do it because the welfare of the nation is my sole ambition. Because I know that no barbarian nation can stand before Rome. But they, like children or wolves, see only that I seek to restrict them in what they think is their lawful rights. Their lawful rights! The right to steal, to burn, to slay! What I seek to accomplish is the work of a century and I strive to accomplish it in one short reign! Suppose I do drag them a little way toward the goal? I will fall in battle and they will back deeper than ever into the pit of barbarism. If my own people do not rise against me. As long as I lead them against the Roman, the Scots, the Britons or the Norse the

Bran Mak Morn

Manuscript

This manuscript apparently was written circa 1922–1923, when Howard was 16 or 17 years old.

Synopsis

Synopsis

The story of a forgotten age; of the clash of swords and the barbarians who fought Rome.

The time is between 296 A.D. and 300 A.D. The augusti are Maximian and

Diocletian. They have appointed co-rulers of somewhat less power but with the dignity of Caesars—Galerius and Constantius.

Salient points: in Britain the rule of the usurper Carausius, former Count of the Saxon Shore, later emperor of Britain (and Gaul?) by virtue of the Roman-British legions, has just come to an end. Allectus, former secretary of the usurper has murdered him in York (British appellation) and calls himself emperor of Britain.

Constantius, endeared to the Britons because of his British wife, Helena, a Celtic princess, with Galerius, is gathering forces on the Gallic coast for an invasion. Note: Constantius divorced Helena in order to marry the daughter of Maximian but he has made a secret pact with his British friends—that his and Helena's son, Constantine, shall succeed him, despite any later heirs.

The commander of the Wall, an old soldier of Carausius, hates Allectus and is preparing to march upon him from the rear with the greater part of his cohorts. Allectus has been intriguing with many leaders, Roman and barbarian. He aspires to the title of augustus of the Roman empire, as Serverus did.

The Goths and Vandals and Franks massed along the Rhine await his word to cross the border and carry the sword to the walls of Rome. But they will not move so long as the two Caesars with their united armies lie east of the channel. These barbarians have sworn allegiance to Allectus and he has promised them rich lands south of the Rhine. But he plays a perilous game. He believes he can defeat the Caesars unless the Commander of the Wall attacks him from the North. This is his plot: to hold the legions in play on the Wall while he presents an unbroken front to the Caesars. As soon as they sail from Gaul his spies will carry the word to his Teutonic allies. When he has broken the Caesars he will sail to Gaul and complete the work they have begun.

To hold the legions on the Wall he has plotted with Bran Mak Morn, chief of the Cruithni Picts, and with a band of desperate Northmen. These Northmen have beached their galleys in a northern bay and lie in wait for the word to attack. But they despise their Pictish allies and insult the Pictish king, killing his sweetheart. He sends a false courier to them bidding them attack, and ambushing them in a morass, wipes them out. So the Commander, unknowing, marches from the Wall and falls on Allectus' forces just as Constantius, sailing unbeknownst in a fog, attacks from the sea-shore. Allectus is killed and the empire is saved.

Love interest: a young British soldier and a British-Roman girl. Dominating figures: Constantius, the Commander, Bran Mak Morn. The story really revolves about the Pictish king.

The story opens with a brief prologue. Then the action begins with a fight on the Wall, led by Bran Mak Morn on one side and the Commander on the other. The story shifts between the heather north of the Wall, and the sea-shore where Allectus awaited attack. Conditions in Gaul and Rome are told by conversations between spies and soldiers.

Worms of the Earth

Draft Version

Worms of the Earth

NOTE: It cannot be stated with certainty that this is the first draft of *Worms of the Earth*, but no other complete draft version survives. Every effort has been made to reproduce Howard's original faithfully, errors and all.

Chapter .1.

"Strike in the nails, soldiers, and let our guest see the reality of our good Roman justice!"

The speaker wrapped his purple cloak closer about him and settled back into his official chair, much as he might have settled back in his seat at the Circus Maximus to enjoy the clash of gladiatorial swords. Realization of power colored his every move. Whetted pride was necessary to Roman satisfaction, and Titus Sulla was justly proud. For he was military governor of Ebbracum and answerable only to the emperor of Rome. He was a powerfully built man of medium height, with the hawk-like features of the pure bred Roman. A mocking smile curved his thin lips, increasing the arrogance of his haughty aspect. Distinctly military in appearance, he wore the golden scaled corselet and chased breast-plate of the Roman commander, with the short stabbing sword at his belt, and he held on his knee the silvered helmet with its plumed crest. Behind him stood a clump of impassive soldiers with shield and spear – blond titans from the Rhineland.

Before him was taking place the scene which evidently gave him so much real gratification – a scene common enough wherever stretched the far-flung boundaries of Rome. A rude cross lay flat upon the barren earth and on it was bound a man – half-naked, wild of aspect with his corded limbs, glaring eyes and shock of tangled hair. His executioners were Roman soldiers. With heavy hammers they prepared to pin the victim's hands and feet to the wood with long iron spikes.

Only a small group of men watched this ghastly scene, in the dread place of execution beyond the walls of the city: the governor and his guards; a few young Roman officers; the man who stood like a bronze image, unspeaking. It was this man to whom Sulla had referred as "guest". Beside the gleaming splendor of the Roman, the quiet garb of this man seemed drab, almost somber.

He was dark, but he did not resemble the Latins about him. There was none of the warm sensuality of the Mediterranean, almost of the Orient, which colored their features, about him. His was not the sensuous olive complection of the south; not his the full red curving lips, nor the rich waving locks suggesting the Greek. Not alone in his straight black hair, in his thin lips, and cold black eyes, was his apartness from the Latins shown. It was in his every line and movement. The blond barbarians behind Sulla's chair were less unlike the man in facial outline, than were the Romans. His dark complection was not the rich olive of the south; rather it was the bleak darkness of the north. The whole aspect of the man somehow vaguely suggested the shadowed mists and cold and icy winds of the naked northern lands. Even his black eyes were cold, savagely cold, like black fires burning through fathoms of ice.

His height was only medium, but there was something about him which transcended mere physical bulk – a certain fierce innate vitality, comparable only to the essence of a wolf or a panther. In every line of his lean, compact body this was evident – in the set of the head on the corded neck, in the broad square shoulders, in the strongly-fashioned arms, in the deep chest, the lean loins, the narrow feet. Built with the savage economy of a panther, he was an image of dynamic potentialities, pent with iron self-control.

At his feet crouched one alike him in complection – but there the resemblance ended. This other was a stunted giant, with gnarly limbs, thick body, a low sloping forehead and an expression of dull ferocity – now clearly mixed with fear. If the man on the cross resembled, in a tribal way, the man who was Titus Sulla's guest, he far more resembled the type of the stunted crouching giant.

“Well, Partha Mak Othna,” said the governor with studied affrontery, “when you return to your tribe, you will have them a tale to tell of the justice of Rome, who rules the south.”

“I will have a tale,” answered the other, in a voice which betrayed no emotion whatever, just as his dark face, schooled to immobility, showed no evidence of the maelstrom in his soul.

“Justice to all under the rule of Rome,” said Sulla, “Pax Romana! Reward for virtue, punishment for wrong!” He laughed inwardly at his own black hypocricy, then continued, “You see, emissary of Pictland, how swiftly Rome punishes the transgressor.”

“I see,” said the Pict in a voice which strongly-curbed anger made deep with menace, “that the subject of a foreign king is dealt with as though he were a Roman slave. You say this man was found guilty – and why not? – when the accuser was a Roman, the witnesses Roman, the judge Roman! He committed murder? In a moment of fury he struck down a Roman merchant who cheated, tricked and robbed him, and to injury added insult – aye, and a blow! Is his king but a dog, that Rome crucifies his subjects at will, condemned by Roman courts? Is his king not able to do justice, were he informed, and formal charges brought against the offender?”

“Well,” said Sulla cynically, “you may inform Bran Mak Morn, yourself. Rome, my friend, makes no account of her actions to barbarian kings. When savages come among us, let them act with discretion or suffer the consequances.”

The Pict shut his iron jaws with a snap that told Sulla that further badgerings would elicit no reply. The Roman made a gesture to the executioners. One of them seized a spike and placed the point against the thick wrist of the victim, and smote heavily. The point sunk deep, through the flesh, crunching against bones. The lips of the man writhed though no moan escaped him. As a trapped wolf fights against his cage, the bound victim writhed and strove instinctively. The veins swelled in his temples, sweat beaded his low forehead, the muscles in arms and legs writhed and knotted. The hammers fell in inexorable strokes, driving the cruel points deeper and deeper, through wrists and ankles; blood flowed over the hands that held the spikes, staining the wood of the cross and the splintering of bones was distinct. Yet the sufferer made no outcry, though his blackened lips writhed back until the gums were visible, and his shaggy head jerked involuntarily from side to side.

The man called Partha Mak Othna stood like an iron image, eyes burning

from an inscrutable face, his whole body hard as iron from the tension of his control. At his feet his servant crouched, hiding his face from the grim sight, his arms about his master's knees. Those arms gripped like steel and under his breath the fellow mumbled ceaselessly as if in invokation.

The last stroke fell; the cords were cut from arm and leg, so that the man would hang supported by the nails alone. He had ceased to struggle, that only twisted the spikes in his agonized wounds. His bright black eyes, unglazed, had not left the face of the man called Partha Mak Othna; in them lingered a desperate shadow of hope. Now the soldiers lifted the cross and set the end of it in the hole prepared, stamped the dirt about it to hold it erect. The Pict hung in midair, suspended by the nails in his flesh, but still no sound escaped his lips. His eyes still hung on the somber face of the emissary, but the shadow of hope was fading.

"He'll live for days!" said Sulla cheerfully, "These Picts are harder than cats to kill! I'll keep a guard of ten soldiers watching night and day to see that no one takes him down before he dies. Ho, there, Valerius, in honor of our esteemed neighbor, king Bran Mak Morn, give him a cup of wine!"

With a laugh the young officer came forward, holding a brimming wine-cup, and rising on his toes, lifted it to the parched lips of the sufferer. In the black eyes flared a red wave of unquenchable hatred; writhing his head aside to avoid even touching the cup, he spat full into the young Roman's eyes. With a curse, Valerius dashed the cup to the ground, and before any could halt him, whipped out his sword and sheathed it in the crucified man's body.

Sulla rose with an imperious exclamation of anger; the man called Partha Mak Othna had started violently, but he bit his lips and said nothing. Valerius seemed somewhat surprized himself, as he sullenly cleansed his sword. The act had been instinctive, following the insult to Roman pride, the one thing unbearable.

"Give up your sword, young man!" exclaimed Sulla, "Centurion Publius, place him under arrest. A few days in a cell with stale bread and water will teach you to curb your patrician pride, in matters dealing with the will of the empire. What, you young fool, do you not realize that you could have made the dog a more kindly gift? Who would not rather desire a quick death on a sword, than a slow agony on the cross? Take him away. And you, centurion, see that guards remain at the cross so that the body is not taken down until the ravens pick bare the bones. Partha Mak Othna, I go to a banquet at the house of Dometrius – will you accompany me?"

The emissary shook his head, his eyes fixed on the limp form which sagged on the cross. He made no reply. Sulla smiled sardonically, then rose and strode away, followed by his secretary who bore the chair ceremoniously, and by the stolid guards, with whom walked Valerius, head sunken.

The man called Partha Mak Othna flung a wide fold of his cloak about his shoulder, halted a moment to gaze at the grim cross with its burden, darkly etched against the crimson sky, where the clouds of night were gathering. Then he turned away, followed by his silent servant.

Chapter .2.

In an inner chamber of Ebbracum, the man called Partha Mak Othna paced tigerishly to and fro. His sandalled feet made no sound on the marble tiles.

“Grom!” he turned to the gnarled servant, “well I know why you held my knees so tightly – why you muttered aid of the Moon-woman – you feared I would lose my control and make a mad attempt to succor that poor wretch. By the gods, I believe that was what the dog Roman wished – his iron-cased war-dogs watched me narrowly, I know.

“Gods black and white, dark and light!” he shook his clenched fists above his head in the black gust of passion, “That I should stand by and see a man of mine butchered on a Roman cross – without justice and with no more trial than that farce! Black gods of R’lyeh, even you I would invoke to the ruin and destruction of Rome! I swear by the bones of Cthulhu, men shall die howling for that deed, and Rome shall cry out as a woman in the dark who treads upon an adder!”

“He knew you, master,” said Grom.

The other dropped his head and covered his eyes with a savage gesture of pain.

“His eyes will haunt me when I lie dying. Aye, he knew me, and almost until the last, I read in his eyes the hope that I might yet aid him. Gods and devils, is Rome to butcher my people beneath my very eyes? Then I am not king but dog!”

“Not so loud, in the name of all the gods!” exclaimed the servant in affright, “Did these Romans suspect you were Bran Mak Morn, they would nail you on a cross beside that other.”

“They will know ere long,” grimly answered the king, “Too long I have lingered here in the guise of an emissary, spying upon mine enemies. They have played with me, these Romans – at least, so they thought – masking their contempt and scorn only under polished satire and subtle derision. Bah! I’ve seen through their baiting; have remained imperturbably serene and swallowed their insults. But this – by the fiends of Hell, this is beyond human endurance! My people look to me – if I fail them – if I fail even one – even the lowest of my people, who shall aid them? To whom shall they turn? By the gods, I’ll answer the gibes of these Roman dogs with black shaft and trenchant steel!”

He paced the floor a moment, his head bent in thought. Slowly his eyes grew murky with a thought so fearful he did not speak it aloud to the waiting Grom.

“I have become somewhat familiar with the maze of Roman politics during my stay in this accursed waste of mud and marble,” said he, “During a war on the wall, Titus Sulla, as governor of this province, is supposed to hasten thither with his centuries. But Sulla cares little for opposing the spears of the heather – so he sends Caius Camillus, who in times of peace patrols the fens of the west. And Sulla takes his place in the tower of Trajan, knowing that he has naught to fear there except an occasional raid by the wild Britons of the West. Ha!”

He gripped Grom with steely fingers.

“Grom, take the red stallion and ride North! Let no grass grow beneath the stallion’s hoofs! Cormac na Connacht has been brooding because there was no war – well, bid him mount for the slaughter! Tell him to sweep the frontier with sword and torch! Let his wild Gaels revel in slaughter. After a time I will be with him. But for a time I have affairs in the west.”

Grom’s eyes gleamed. Without a word he turned and left the presence of the king, who stepped to a barred window and gazed out into the moonlit street.

“Wait until the moon sets,” he muttered grimly, “Then I’ll take the road to – Hell! But before I go I have a debt to pay.”

The stealthy clink of a hoof on the flags reached him.

“He’ll pass the gates,” he muttered, “Not even Rome can hold a Pictish reiver! With the gold I gave him, and his own craft, he’ll find a key to every gate between this house and the heather! Now I’ll sleep until the moon sets.”

With a snarl at the marble frieze-work and Doric columns, as objects symbolic of Rome, he flung himself down on a couch, from which he had long since impatiently torn the cushions and silk stuffs, as too soft for his hard body. Hate and the black passion of vengeance seethed in him, yet he went instantly to sleep. The first lesson he had learned in his bitter hard life was to snatch sleep any time he could, like a wolf that snatches sleep on the hunting trail. Generally his sleep was as light and dreamless as a panther's, but tonight it was otherwise.

He sank into fleecy grey fathoms of slumber and in a timeless, misty realm he met the tall, lean white-bearded figure of old Gonar, the priest of the Moon. And Bran stood aghast for Gonar's face was white as driven snow and he shook with deep terror. Well might Bran stand aghast for in all the years of his life, he had never seen Gonar the Wise show any sign of any fear.

"What now, old one?" asked the king, "Goes all well in Pictdom?"

"All is well in Pictdom where my body lies sleeping," answered old Gonar, "Across the void I have come to battle with you for your soul. King, are you mad, this thought you have thought in your brain?"

"Gonar," answered Bran somberly, "this day I stood still and watched a man of mine die on the cross of Rome. What his name or his rank, I do not know. I do not care. He might have been a faithful, unknown warrior, of mine, he might have been an outlaw. I only know that he was mine; the first scents he knew were the scents of the heather; the first light he saw was the sunrise on the Pictish hills. He belonged to me, not to Rome. If punishment was just, then none but I should have dealt it. If he was to be tried, none but I should have been his judge. The same blood flowed in our veins; the same fire maddened our brains; in babyhood we listened to the same old tales, and in youth we sang the same old songs. He was bound to my heart-strings, as every man and every woman and every child of Pictland is bound. It was mine to protect him; since I could not, it is mine to avenge him."

"But in the name of the gods, Bran," expostulated Gonar, "take your vengeance in another way! Return to the heather – mass your warriors – join with Cormac and his Gaels, and spread a sea of blood and flame the length of the great Wall!"

"All that I will do," grimly answered Bran, "But now – NOW I will have a vengeance such as no Roman ever dreamed of! Ha, what do they know of the mysteries of this ancient isle, which sheltered strange life before Rome rose from the marshes of the Tiber?"

“Bran, there are weapons too foul to use, even against Rome!”

Bran barked short and sharp as a jackal.

“Ha! There are no weapons I would not use against Rome! My back is at the wall – I will fight her with what weapons I can! By the blood of the fiends, has Rome fought me fair? Bah! I am a barbarian king, with wolfskin robes and an iron crown, fighting with my handful of bows and broken pikes against the queen of the world! What have I? The heather hills, the wattle huts, the spears of my shock-headed tribesmen! And I fight Rome – with her armored legions, her broad fertile plains and rich seas – her wealth, her steel, her gold, her mastery and her wrath. By steel and fire I will fight her – and by subtlety and treachery – by the thorn in the foot, the adder in the path, the venom in the cup, the dagger in the dark – aye,” his voice sank somberly, “and by the worms of the earth!”

“But it is madness, this plan of yours,” cried Gonar, “you will perish in the attempt – you will go down to Hell and you will not return! What of your people then?”

“If I cannot serve them I had better die,” growled the king.

“But you cannot even reach the beings you plan to use,” cried Gonar, “For untold centuries they have dwelt APART. There is no door by which you can come to them. Long ago they severed the bonds that bound them to the world we know.”

“Long ago,” answered Bran somberly, “you told me that nothing was separated from the stream of Life – a saying the truth of which I have often seen evident. No race, no form of life but is close knit somehow, by some manner, to the rest of Life and the world. Somewhere there is a thin tie-rib connecting they I seek to the world I know. Somewhere there is a Door. And somewhere among the bleak fens of the west I will find it.”

Stark horror flooded Gonar’s eyes and he gave back crying: “Woe! Woe! Woe to Pictdom! Woe to the unborn kingdom! Woe, black woe to the sons of men! Woe, woe, woe, woe!”

Bran awoke to a shadowed room and the starlight on the window bars. The moon had sunk from sight though its glow was still faintly evident above the house tops. Memory of his dream shook him and he swore beneath his breath.

Rising he flung off cloak and mantle, donning a light shirt of black mesh-mail, and girting on sword and dirk. Then wrapping his wide cloak about him, he silently left the house. A moment's groping in the stable and he placed his hand over the stallion's nose, checking the nicker. Working without a light he swiftly bridled and saddled the great brute, and went into the shadowy side-street, leading him. At his girdle hung a pouch heavy with minted gold that bore the stamp of Rome. He had come to Ebbracum to pose as an emissary of Pictdom, and to spy. But being a barbarian, he could not play his part in sedate dignity. He retained a crowded memory of wild feasts, where wine flowed in fountains; of white bosomed Roman women who, sated with civilized lover, looked on a virile barbarian with something more than favor; of gladiatorial games; and of other games where dice clicked and tall stacks of gold changed hands. He had drunk deeply and gambled recklessly, after the manner of barbarians, and of late his luck had been good. He had had a remarkable run of luck, due possibly to the indifference with which he won or lost. Gold to the Pict was so much dust, flowing through his fingers. In his land there was no need of it. But he had learned its power in the boundaries of civilization.

He came almost under the shadow of the wall and saw ahead of him loom up the great watch-tower which was connected and reared above the wall. One corner of the castle-like fortress, furtherest from the wall, served as a dungeon. Bran left his horse standing with reins hanging to the ground, in a dark alley and stole forward.

The young officer Valerius was waken from a light, unquiet sleep by a stealthy sound at the barred window. He woke and sat up, cursing softly under his breath as the faint-starlight that etched the window-bars fell across the bare stone floor and reminded him of his disgrace. Well, in a few days he'd be out of it, and let any man or woman gibe at him! Damn that insolent Pict! But wait, he thought suddenly, what of the sound that had wakened him.

"Hssst!" a voice from the window.

A friend? If so, why so much secrecy? Valerius rose and crossed his cell, coming close to the window. Outside all was dim in the moonlight and he made out but a shadowy form close to the window.

"Who are you?" he leaned close against the bars, straining his eyes into the gloom.

His answer was a sudden snarl of laughter, a long flicker of steel in the starlight. Valerius reeled away from the window and crashed to the floor,

clutching his throat, gurgling horribly as he tried to scream. Blood gushed in torrents through his fingers, forming about his stiffening body a pool that reflected the dim starlight dully and redly.

Outside Bran glided away, swift and fleeting as a shadow, without pausing to peer into the cell; he knew his stroke had gone home. In another minute the guard would round the corner on their regular round. Even now he heard the measured tramp of their iron-clad feet. Before they came in sight, he had vanished, and they clomped stolidly by the cell-window with no intimation of the corpse that lay on the floor within.

Bran rode to the small gate in the western wall, unchallenged by the sleepy watch. What fear of foreign invasion in Ebbracum? – and certain well organized thieves and women-stealers made it profitable to the watchmen not to be too vigilant. But the single guardsman at the western gate – his fellows lay drunk in a nearby brothel – lifted his spear and bawled for Bran to halt and give an account of himself. Silently the Pict reined closer. Masked in the dark cloak, he seemed dim and indistinct to the Roman, who only caught the glitter of his cold eyes in the gloom. But Bran held up his hand against the starlight and the soldier caught the gleam of gold; in the other hand he saw a long gleam of steel. The soldier understood and between the choice of a golden bribe, or a battle to the death with this unknown rider who was apparently a barbarian of some sort, he did not hesitate. With a grunt he lowered his spear and swung the gate open. Bran rode through, casting a handful of coins to the Roman. They fell about his feet in a golden shower, clinking against the flags. He bent in greedy haste to retrieve them and Bran Mak Morn rode westward like a flying ghost in the night.

Chapter .3.

Into the dim fens of the west came Bran Mak Morn. A cold wind breathed across the gloomy waste, and against the grey sky a few herons flapped heavily. The long reeds and marsh-grass waved in broken undulations and out across the wastes a few still meres reflected the dull light. Here and there rose curiously regular hillocks above the general levels, and gaunt against the somber sky, Bran saw a marching line of upright stones – menhirs, reared by what nameless hands?

Beyond these fens lay the foothills that grew to the wild mountains of Wales where dwelt still wild Celtic tribes that knew not the yoke of Rome. A row of well-garrisoned watch-towers held them in check. Even now, far away across the moors, Bran could glimpse the unassailable keep men call the Tower of

Trajan.

Human life was not utterly lacking, even in these barren wastes. Bran met the silent men of the fen – reticent, dark of eye and hair, speaking a strange mixed tongue whose long blended integrals had forgotten their pristine separate sources. Bran recognized a certain kinship in these people to himself, but he looked on them with the scorn of a pure blooded patrician for men of mixed strains.

Not that the common people of Caledonia were altogether pure-blooded – they got their stocky bodies and massive limbs from a primitive Teutonic race which had found its way into Caledonia even before the Celtic conquest of Britain was completed, and had been absorbed by the wild Picts. But the chiefs of Bran's folk had kept their blood free from foreign admixture since the beginnings of Time, and he himself was a pure-bred Pict of the Old Race. But these fen-men, over-run repeatedly by British, Gaelic and Roman conquerors, had assimulated the blood of each, and in the process, almost forgotten their original language and lineage.

Only in Caledonia, Bran brooded, had his people, once masters of all Europe, resisted the flood of Aryan conquest. He had heard of a Pictish people called Basques, who, in the crags of the Pyrenees called themselves an unconquered race; but he knew they had paid tribute for centuries to the ancestors of the Gaels, before these Celtic conquerors abandoned their mountain-realm and set sail for Ireland. Only the Picts of Caledonia had remained free, and they had been scattered into small feuding tribes – he was the first acknowledged king in five hundred years – the beginning of a new dynasty – no, a revival of an ancient dynasty under a new name. In the very teeth of imperial Rome, he dreamed his dreams of empire.

He wandered through the fens, seeking a Door. Of his quest he said nothing to the dark-eyed fen-men. They told him news that drifted from mouth to mouth – a tale of war in the north, the blast of war-trumpets along the winding Wall, of gathering fires in the heather, of flame and smoke and rapine, and the glutting of Gaelic swords in the crimson sea of slaughter. The eagles of the legions were moving northward and the ancient roads resounded to the measured tramp of the iron-clad feet. And Bran, in the fens of the west, laughed, well pleased.

One grey evening he strode on foot across the moors, blackly etched against the dimly crimson fire of the sunset. He felt the incredible antiquity of the slumbering land, as he walked like the last man on the day after the end of the

world. Yet at last he saw a token of human life – a drab hut of wattle and mud, set in the reedy breast of the fen.

A woman greeted him from the open door, and Bran's somber eyes narrowed with a sudden suspicion. The woman was not old, yet the evil wisdom of ages was in her eyes; her garments were ragged and scanty, her black locks tangled and unkempt, lending her an aspect of wildness well in keeping with her grim surroundings. Her red lips laughed but there was no mirth in her laughter, only a hint of mockery, and under her lips her teeth showed sharp and pointed like fangs.

"Enter, master," said she, "if you do not fear to share the roof of the witch-woman of Dagon-moor!"

Bran entered and sat him down on a broken bench while the woman busied herself with her scanty meal which cooked over an open fire on a squalid hearth. He studied her lithe, almost serpentine motions, the ears which were almost pointed, the yellow eyes which slanted curiously.

"What do you seek on the fens, my lord?" she asked turning toward him with a supple twist of her whole body.

"I seek a Door," he answered, chin resting on his fist, "I have a song to sing to the worms of the earth!"

She started upright, a jar falling from her hands.

"That is an ill saying, even spoken in chance," she stammered.

"I speak not by chance but by intent," he answered, "By the mottles on your skin, by the slanting of your eyes, by the taint in your veins, I speak with full knowledge and meaning."

Awhile she stood silent, her lips smiling but her face inscrutable.

"Are you mad, man?" she spoke, "That in your madness you come seeking that from which strong men fled screaming in old times?"

"I seek a vengeance," he answered, "THEY I seek may give me that vengeance."

She shook her head.

“You have listened to a bird singing; you have dreamed empty dreams.”

“I have heard a viper hiss,” he growled, “And I do not dream. Enough of this by-play. I came seeking a link between two world; I have found it.”

“I need lie to you no more, man of the North,” answered the woman, “THEY you seek still dwell beneath these sleeping hills. They have drawn apart, further and further from the world you know.”

“But they still steal forth in the night to grip straying women on the moors,” said he, his gaze on her slanted eyes. She laughed wickedly.

“What would you of me?”

“That you bring me to them.”

She flung back her head with a scornful laugh. His left hand locked like iron in the breast of her scanty garment and his right closed on his hilt. She laughed in his face.

“Strike and be damned, my northern wolf! Do you think that such life as mine is so sweet that I would cling to it as a babe to the breast?”

His grasp fell away.

“You are right. Threats are foolish. I will buy your aid.”

“How?” the laughing voice hummed with mockery.

Bran opened his pouch and poured into his cupped palm a stream of gold.

“More wealth than all the men of the fen ever dreamed of, together.”

Again she laughed. “What is money to me? Put up your rusty metal.”

“Name me a price,” he urged, “The head of an enemy – ”

“This!” she laughed, and springing, struck cat-like. But the dagger splintered on the mail beneath his cloak and he flung her off with a loathing flirt of his wrist which tossed her sprawling across her straw-strewn bunk. Lying there she laughed up at him.

“Very well! I will name you a price!” She rose and came close to him, her disquietingly long hands fastened into his cloak, “I will tell you, Bran Mak

Morn, king of Caledon! Oh, I knew you when you came into my hut with your black hair and cold eyes. I will lead you to the door of Hades if you like – for a price. And that price shall be the kisses of a king! What think you of my wasted and bitter life, I whom mortal men loathe and fear? I have not known the love of men, the clasp of a strong arm, the sting of human kisses, I the were-woman of the moors! One night of love, oh king, and I grant you your desire!”

Bran eyed her somberly; he reached forth and gripped her arm in his iron fingers. And an involuntary shudder shook him at the feel of her sleek skin. He nodded slowly, and drawing her close to him, forced his head down to meet her lifted lips.

Chapter .4.

The cold grey mists of dawn wrapped Black Bran like a clammy cloak. He turned to the woman whose slanted eyes gleamed in the grey gloom.

“Make good your part of the contract,” he said roughly, “Give me a key to Hell.”

“I will,” the red lips smiled terribly, “Go to the mound men call Dagon’s Barrow. Draw aside the stone that blocks the chamber and enter. The floor of the chamber is made of five great stones, each eight sided, four grouped about the fifth. Lift out the center stone – and you will see!”

“Will I find the Black Stone?” he asked.

“Dagon’s Barrow is the Door to the Black Stone,” she asked, “If you dare take it.”

“Will the symbol be well guarded?” he unconciously loosening his blade in its sheath. The red lips curled mockingly.

“If you meet any of the folk of the Stone, you will die as no mortal man has died for long centuries. The Stone is not guarded. Perhaps THEY will be near – perhaps not. You must take your chance. But none guards it; why should they, since no man has sought them, has ever sought them? And no foe has come against them for a thousand years. Beware, king of the Picts! It was your folk you, so long ago, cut the thread that bound They of the Stone to human life. They were almost human then – they overspread the land and knew the sunlight. Now they have drawn APART. They know not the sunlight and shun the light of the moon. Not even do they seek the stars. They might

have been human in time but for the spears of your ancestors."

The sky was overcast with misty grey, through which the sun shone coldly yellow, when Bran came to Dagon's Barrow, a round hillock overgrown with rank grass of a curious fungoid appearance. On one side of the mound showed the entrance of a crudely built stone chamber which evidently penetrated the barrow. One great stone blocked the entrance to the tomb. Bran laid hold of the sharp edges and exerted all his dynamic strength. It held fast. He drew his sword and thrust the blade between the blocking stone and the sill. Working carefully, as with a lever, he managed to loosen the great stone and soon wrenched it out. A foul charnel house scent flowed out of the aperture, and the dim sunlight seemed less to illuminate the opening than to be fouled by the rank darkness which clung there.

Sword in hand, ready for he knew not what, Bran groped his way into the chamber which was long and narrow, built up of heavy joined stones, and was too low for him to stand erect. Either his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the gloom, or the darkness was, after all, somewhat lightened by the sunlight filtering in through the entrance. At any rate he came into a round low chamber and was able to make out its general dome-like outline. Here no doubt, in old times had reposed the bones of he for whom this mound had been reared, but now of those bones no vestige remained on the stone floor. Five stones, Atla had said. And bending close and straining his eyes, he made out the strange, startlingly regular pattern of the floor – four well cut slabs grouped about a central stone.

He drove the point of his sword into a crack and pried carefully. The edge of the central stone tilted slightly upward. A little work and he lifted it out and leaned it against the curving wall. Straining his eyes downward he saw only the gaping blackness of a dark well, with small, worn steps that led downward and out of sight. He did not hesitate. Though the skin between his shoulders crawled curiously he swung himself into the abyss and felt the clinging blackness swallow him.

Groping downward he felt his feet slip and stumble on steps too small for human feet. With one hand pressed hard against the side of the well he steadied himself, fearing a fall into unknown and unlighted depths. The steps seemed to be cut into solid rock, yet his sense of feel told him that they were greatly worn away. The further he progressed, the less like steps they became, mere bumps of worn stone. Then the direction of the shaft changed sharply. It still led down but at a shallow slant, down which he could walk, elbows braced against the hollowed sides, head bent low beneath the curved roof. The

steps had ceased altogether, and the stone felt slimy to the touch, like a serpent's lair. What beings, Bran wondered, had slithered up and down this slanting shaft for how many centuries?

The tunnel narrowed until Bran found it rather difficult to shove through. He lay on his back and pushed himself along with his hands, feet first. Still he knew he was sinking deeper and deeper into the very guts of the earth – how far below the surface he was, he dared not contemplate. Then ahead began a faint witch-fire gleam. He grinned savagely and without mirth. If they he sought came suddenly upon him, how could he fight in that narrow shaft? But he had put the thought of personal fear or danger behind him when he began this hellish quest. He crawled on, thoughtless of all else but his goal.

And he came at last into a vast space where he could stand upright. He could not see the roof of the place. The blackness pressed in on all sides, and beside him he could see the entrance to the shaft from which he had just emerged – a black well in the darkness. But in front of him a strange grisly radiance glowed about a grim black altar built of human skulls. The source of that light he could not determine, but on the altar lay a sullen night-black object – the Black Stone!

Bran wasted no time in giving thanks that the guardians of the grim relic were nowhere near. He caught up the stone and gripping it under his left arm, crawled into the shaft. When a man turns his back on Peril, it menaces him more than when he advances upon it. So with Bran, crawling back up the nighted shaft, with his grisly prize, felt the darkness turn on him and slink behind him, dripping fanged and grinning. Sweat beaded his flesh and he hastened as well as he could, ears strained for some stealthy sound to betray that fell shapes were at his heels. Strong shudders shook him, despite himself, and the short hair on his neck prickled as if a cold wind blew at his back.

When he reached the first of the tiny steps he felt as if he had attained to the outer boundaries of the mortal world. Up them he went, stumbling and slipping, and with a deep gasp of relief, came out into the tomb, whose vague greyness seemed like the blaze of noon, in comparison to the Stygian darkness he had just traversed. He replaced the central stone and strode into the light of the outer day. He lifted the great blocking stone, shoving it back into place, and picking up the cloak he had left at the mouth of the tomb, he wrapped it about the Black Stone and hurried away, a strong revulsion and loathing shaking his soul and lending wings to his strides.

A grey silence brooded over the land. It was desolate as the blind side of the

moon, yet Bran felt the potentialities of life – under his feet, in the brown earth – sleeping, but how soon to waken and in what horrific fashion?

He came through the tall masking reeds to the still deep lake men called Dagon's Mere. No slightest ripple ruffled the cold blue water to give evidence of the grisly monster legend said dwelt beneath. Bran looked all about, scanning the breathless landscape. He saw no hint of life, human or otherwise. He sought the instincts of his savage's soul to know if any unseen eyes fixed their lethal gaze upon him, and found no response. He was alone as if he were the last man alive on earth. Swiftly unwrapping the Black Stone he weighed it in his hands and calculating the distance, flung it far out, so it fell almost exactly in the middle of the lake; a sullen splash and the waters closed over it. There a moment of shimmering flashes on the bosom of the lake, then the surface was placid again.

Chapter .5.

The were-woman turned swiftly as Bran approached her door. Her slant eyes widened.

"You! And alive! And sane!"

"I have been into Hell and I have returned," he growled, "What is more, I have that which I sought."

"The Black Stone?" she cried, "You have really stolen it? Where is it?"

"No matter; but last night my stallion screamed in his stall and I heard something crunch beneath his thundering hoofs which was not wood – and there was blood on his hoofs when I came to see, and blood on the floor of the stall. And I have heard stealthy sounds in the night, and noises beneath my dirt floor, as if worms burrowed deep in the earth. They know I have stolen their Stone – have you betrayed me?"

She shook her head.

"I keep your secret; they do not need my word to know you. The further they have retreated from the world of men, the greater have grown their powers in other ways. Some dawn your hut will lie empty and if men dare investigate they will find nothing – except crumbling bits of earth on the dirt floor."

Bran smiled terribly.

“I have not planned and toiled thus far to fall prey to the talons of the vermin of the earth. I have a word for the worms of the earth. I have their one idol – or whatever it be to them. If they strike me down in the night, they will never know what became of it. I will bargain with them.”

“Dare you come with me and meet them in the night?” she asked.

“Thunder of all gods!” he roared, “Who are you to ask me if I dare? Lead me to them, and let me bargain for a vengeance this night. The hour of retribution draws nigh. This day I saw silvered helmets and bright shields gleam across the fens – the new commander has arrived at the Tower to Trajan and Caius Camillus has marched to the Wall.”

That night the king went across dark desolation of the moors with the silent were-woman. This night was thick and still as if in ancient slumber. The stars blinked redly, mere points of red struggling through the unbreathing gloom. Their gleam was dimmer than the glitter in the eyes of the woman who glided beside the king. Strange thoughts shook Bran, vague, titanic, primeval. Tonight ancestral linkings with these slumbering fens stirred in his soul and troubled him with the vague, eon-veiled shapes of monstrous dreams.

Ahead of them loomed a low range of hills, which connecting with other, further ranges, climbed at last to the mountains of Wales, far away. The woman led the way up what might have been a sheep-path, and halted before a wide black gaping cave.

“A door to those you seek, oh king!” her laughter rang hateful in the gloom, “Dare ye enter?”

His fingers closed in her tangled locks and he shook her viciously.

“Ask me but once more if I dare,” he grated, “And your head and shoulders part company! Lead on.”

Her laughter was like sweet deadly venom. They passed into the cave and Bran struck flint and steel. The flicker of the tinder showed him a wide dusty cavern, on the roof of which hung clusters of bats. Lifting his torch he scanned the shadows recesses, seeing nothing but dust and emptiness.

“Where are THEY?” he growled.

She beckoned him to the back of the cave and leaned against the rough wall, as if casually. But the king’s keen eyes caught the motion of her hand pressing

hard against a projecting ledge. He recoiled as a round black well gaped at his feet. Again her laugh slashed him like a keen silver knife. He held the torch to the opening, and saw again small worn steps leading down.

“THEY do not need those steps,” said Atla, “Once they did, before your people drove them into the darkness. But you will need them.”

She thrust the torch into a nitche above the well; it shed a faint red light into the darkness below. She gestured into the well and Bran loosened his sword and stepped into the shaft. As he went down into the mystery of the darkness, the light was blotted out above him, and he thought for an instant Atla had covered the opening again. But he then realized that she was descending after him.

The descent was not long. Abruptly Bran felt his feet on a solid floor. Atla swung down beside him and stood in the dim circle of light that drifted down the shaft. Bran could not see the limits of the place into which he had come.

“This is a great cave,” said Atla, her voice seeming small and strangely brittle in the vastness, “Many caves in these hills are but doors to greater caves which lie beneath. Even as a man’s outer actions are but small indications of the dark caverns of thought lying behind and beneath.”

And now Bran was aware of movement in the gloom. The darkness was filled with stealthly noises he knew no human foot might make. Abruptly sparks began to flash and float in the blackness, like flickering fire-flies. Closer they came until they girdled him in a wide half-moon. And beyond the first ring gleamed other sparks, a solid sea of them, fading away in the gloom until the furtherest were mere tiny pin-points of light. And Bran knew they were the eyes of the beings who had come upon him in such numbers that his mind reeled at the contemplation – and at the vastness of the cavern.

Now that he faced his foes, Bran knew no fear. He felt the waves of terrible menace emanating from them, the grisly hatred, the inhuman threat to body, mind and soul. Being of an incredibly ancient race himself, he more fully realized the horror of his position than a Briton or a Roman would have been able to do, but he did not fear. His blood raced fiercely, but it was the hot excitement of the hazard, not the drive of terror.

“They know you have the Stone, oh king,” said Atla, and though he knew she feared, though he felt her physical efforts to control her trembling limbs, there was no quiver of fright in her voice, “You are in deadly peril; they know you of old – oh, they remember the days when their ancestors were men! I cannot

save you; both of us will die as no human has died for ten centuries. You have stolen their Stone – and you are a Pict."

Bran laughed and at the savagery in his laughter, the closing ring of fire shrank back. Drawing his sword with a rasp of steel, he set his back against what he hoped was a solid stone wall. Facing the glittering eyes, with his sword gripped in his right hand and his dirk in his left, he laughed as a blood-hungry wolf snarls.

"Aye," he ground, "I am a Pict, a son of those warriors who drove your ancestors before them like chaff before the storm! My people flooded the land with your blood, and heaped high your skulls for a sacrifice to the Moon-woman! You who fled of old before my race, dare ye now snarl at your master? Roll on me like a flood, now, if ye dare! Before your viper fangs drink my life, I will reap your multitudes like ripened barley, of your severed heads will I build a tower and of your mangled corpses will I rear up a wall! Dogs of the dark, vermin of Hell, worms of the earth, rush in and try my steel! When Death finds me in this dark cavern, your living will howl for the scores of your dead and your Black Stone will be lost to you forever – for only I know where it is hidden and not all the tortures of all the Hells can wring the secret from my lips!"

Then followed a tense silence; Bran faced the fire-lit darkness, tensed like a wolf at bay, waiting the charge; at his side the woman cowered, her eyes a-blaze. Then from the silent ring that hovered beyond the torch-light, sounded a vague abhorrent murmur. Bran, prepared as he was for anything, started. Gods, was THAT the speech of creatures which had once been called men?

Atla straightened, listening intently. From her lips came the same hideous soft sibilances, and Bran, though he had already known the grisly secret of her being, knew that never again could he touch her save with soul-shaking loathing.

She turned to him, a strange smile showing her red lips dimly in the ghostly light.

"They fear you, oh king! By the black secrets of R'lyeh, who are you that Hell itself quails before you? It is not your steel they fear, but you yourself by the stark ferocity of your soul have driven unused fear into their strange minds. And they will buy back the Black Stone at any price."

"Good," Bran sheathed his weapons, "They shall promise not to molest you because of your part in this night's work. And," his voice hummed like the

purr of a hunting tiger, “they shall deliver into my hands Titus Sulla, governor of Ebbracum, now commander of the Tower of Trajan. This they can do – how I know not. But I know that it the old days, when my people warred with these Children of the Night, babes disappeared from guarded huts and none saw the stealers come and go. Do they understand?”

Again rose the low frightful sounds and Bran, who feared not their wrath, shuddered at their voice.

“They understand,” said Atla, “Bring the Black Stone to Dagon’s Ring tomorrow night when the earth is veiled with the blackness that fore-runs the dawn. Lay the Stone on the atlar. There they will bring Titus Sulla to you. Trust them; they have not interfered in human affairs for many a century, but they will keep their word.”

Bran nodded and turning climbed up the stair with Atla behind him. At the top he turned and looked down once more. As far as he could see floated a glittering ocean of yellow eyes, upturned. But the owners of those eyes kept carefully beyond the dim circle of torch-light and of their bodies he could see nothing. Their low hissing speech floated up to him, and he shuddered as his imagination visualized, not a throng of biped creatures, but a swarming swaying myriad of serpents, gazing up at him with their glittering unwinking eyes.

He swung into the upper cave and Atla swung the blocking stone in place. It fitted with uncanny precision; Bran was unable to discern any crack in the apparently solid floor of the cavern. Atla made a motion to extinguish the torch but the king stayed here.

“Keep it so,” he growled, “until we are out of the cave; we might tread on an adder in the dark.”

Atla’s sweetly hateful laughter rose maddeningly in the flickering gloom.

Chapter .6.

It was not long before sunset when Bran came again to the reed-grown marge of Dagon’s-Mere. Casting cloak and sword-belt on the ground, he stripped himself to his short learthern breeches. Then gripping his naked dirk in his teeth, he went into the water with the smooth ease of a diving seal. Swimming strongly he gained the center of the small lake, and there, turning he drove himself downward. The mere was deeper than he had thought. It seemed he would never reach the bottom and when he did his groping hands failed to

find what he sought. A roaring in his ears warned him and he swam to the surface. Gulping deep of the refreshing air, he dived again, and again his quest was fruitless. A third time he sought the depths, and this time his groping hands met a familiar object in the silt of the bottom. Grasping it, he swam up to the surface.

The Stone was not particularly bulky but it was heavy. He swam leisurely and suddenly was aware of a curious stir in the waters about him, which was not caused by his own exertions. Glancing over his shoulders he distinctly saw a swirl on the surface as if some object had dived under. Holding the Stone under one arm he shifted his dirk to his hand, and treading water with his feet, thrust his face below the surface and tried to pierce the blue depths with his eyes. Below and behind him he glimpsed a vast dim bulk that floated after him like a shadow. It seemed to be approaching him and he again took his dirk between his teeth and swam faster – not frightened, but wary. His feet struck the shallows and he waded up on the shelving shore. Looking back he saw the waters swirl again and then subside. He shook his head, swearing. He had discounted the ancient legend which made Dagon's Mere the lair of a nameless water-monster, but now he instinctively felt that he had narrowly escaped death in some form. The time-worn myths of the land were taking form and coming to life before his eyes. What primeval shape lurked below the surface of that treacherous mere, Bran could not guess, but that it was some horrific form he knew from his indistinct glimpse. The fenmen had good reason for shunning Dagon's Mere, after all.

Bran donned his garments, mounted the black stallion and rode across the fen in the desolate crimson of the sunset's after-glow, with the Black Stone wrapped in his cloak. He rode, not to his hut, but to the west, in the direction of the Tower of Trajan and the Ring of Dagon. As he covered the miles that lay between, night fell and the red stars winked out. Midnight passed him in the moonless night and still Bran rode on. His heart was hot for his meeting with Titus Sulla. Atla had supposed he wished to torture the Roman. No such thought was in Bran's mind. He intended giving the military governor a chance with weapons – with Bran's own sword he should face the Pictish king's dirk and live or die according to his prowess. And though Sulla was famed throughout the provinces as a swordsman, Bran felt no doubt as to the outcome.

Dagon's Ring lay some distance from the Tower – a sullen circle of tall gaunt stones planted upright, with a rough-hewn stone altar in the center. The Romans looked on these menhirs with aversion; they thought the Druids had reared them; but the Celts supposed Bran's people, the Picts, had builded

them – and Bran well knew who reared those grim stones in lost ages, though why, he but dimly guessed.

The king did not ride straight to the Ring. He was consumed with curiosity as to how his grim allies intended carrying out their promise; that they could snatch Titus Sulla from the very midst of his men, he felt sure, and he believed he knew how they would do it, but he was not sure. He felt the gnawings of a strange misgiving, as if he had tampered with powers of unknown breadth and depth, and had loosed forces which he could not control.

Some instinct prompted him to ride toward the Tower. He knew he was near; but for the thick darkness he could have plainly seen its stark outline tusking the horizon. Even now he should be able to make it out dimly – an obscure, shuddersome premonition shook him and he spurred the stallion into a swift canter.

Now the the Tower leaped into view with startling suddeness – and Bran literally staggered in his saddle as if from a physical impact, so stunning was the surprize of what met his gaze. There was the impregnable Tower of Trajan – aye, but impregnable no longer! Bran's astounded gaze rested on a gigantic pile of ruins – of shattered stone and crumbled granite, from which jutted the jagged and splintered ends of broken beams. At one corner of the tumbled heap one tower rose out of the waste of crumpled masonry, and it leaned drunkenly, as if its foundations had been half-cut away. Bran dismounted and walked forward, dazed by bewilderment. The moat was filled in places by fallen stones and broken pieces of mortared wall. He crossed over and came among the ruins. Where, he knew, only a few hours before, the flags had resounded to the martial tread of iron-clad feet, and the walls had echoed to the clang of shields and the blast of the loud-throated trumpet, a horrific silence reigned.

Almost under Bran's feet a broken shape writhed and groaned. The king bent down to the legionary who lay in a sticky red pool of his own blood. A single glance showed the Pict that the man, horribly crushed and shattered, was dying.

Lifting the bloody head, Bran placed his flask to the pulped lips and the Roman instinctively drank deep, gulping through splintered teeth. In the dim starlight Bran saw his glazed eyes roll.

"The walls fell," muttered the dying man, "They crashed down like the skies falling on the day of doom. Ah Jove, the skies rained shards of granite and

hail-stones of marble!”

“I have no earth-quake shock,” muttered Bran.

“It was no earth-quake,” muttered the Roman, “Before last dawn it began – the faint dim scratching and clawing far below the earth. We of the guard heard it – like rats burrowing, or like worms hollowing out the earth. Titus laughed at us – but all day long we heard it. Then at midnight, the Tower quivered and seemed to settle – as if her foundations were being dug away – ”

A shudder shook Bran Mak Morn. The worms of the earth! Thousands of vermin digging like moles far below the castle – burrowing away the foundations –

“What of Titus Sulla?” he asked, again holding the flask to the legionary’s lips; in that moment the dying Roman seemed like a brother to him.

“Even as the Tower shuddered we heard a fearful scream from the governor’s chamber,” muttered the soldier, “We rushed there – as we broke down the door we heard his screams – they seemed to recede – INTO THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH! We rushed in; the chamber was empty. His blood-stained sword lay on the floor; in the stone flags of the floor, a black hole gaped. Then – the – towers – reeled – the – roof – broke – the – walls – crashed.”

A strong convulsion shook the broken figure.

“Lay me down, friend,” whispered the Roman, “I die.”

And he had ceased to breathe before Bran could comply. The Pict rose, mechanically cleansing his hands.

“Gods!” he whispered, and again, “Gods!”

Turning to his stallion he mounted and reined away, and as he rode over the darkened fen, the weight of the accursed Black Stone under his cloak was as the weight of a foul nightmare on a mortal breast.

As he approached the Ring, he saw an eery glow within, so that the gaunt stones stood etched like the ribs of a skeleton in which a witch-fire burns. The stallion snorted and reared and Bran tied him to one of the menhirs. Carrying the Stone he strode into the grisly circle and he saw Atla standing beside the altar, one hand on her hip, her sinuous body swaying in a serpentine manner. The altar glowed all over with ghastly light and Bran knew someone –

probably Atla – had rubbed it with phosphorous from some dank swamp or quag-mire.

He strode forward and whipping his cloak from about the Stone, flung the accursed thing on the altar.

“I have fulfilled my part of the contract,” he growled.

“And they, their’s,” she retorted, “Look – they come!”

He wheeled, his hand instinctively dropping to his sword. Outside the Ring the stallion screamed savagely and reared against his tether. The night wind moaned through the waving grass and an abhorrent soft hissing mingled with it. Between the menhirs flowed Shadows, unstable and chaotic. The Ring filled with glittering eyes, which stayed beyond the dim illusive circle of light cast by the phosphorescent altar. Somewhere in the darkness a human voice tittered and gibbered idiotically. Bran stiffened, the shadow of a Horror clawing at his soul.

He strained his eyes, trying to make out the shadowy shapes that ringed him. In one place the shadows heaved and writhed and one of the forms was half pushed forward. But Bran got only a fleeting impression of a broad square head, loose writhing lips that barred curved pointed fangs, and a curiously misshapen, dwarfish body – all set off by those unwinking reptilian eyes. Gods, could a human race sink into such frightful depths of retrogression?

“Let them make good their bargain!” he exclaimed angrily, shaken.

“Then see, oh king!” cried Atla in voice of piercing mockery.

There was a stir, a seethe in the writhing mass of shadows, and from the darkness crept, like a four-legged animal, a human shape that fell down and groveled at Bran’s feet and writhed and mowed, and lifting a death’s-head, mewed and howled like a dying dog. In the ghastly light, Bran, soul-shaken, saw the blank glassy eyes, the bloodless features, the loose, writhing, froth-covered lips of sheer lunacy – gods, was this Titus Sulla, the proud lord of life and death of Ebbracum’s proud city?

Bran bared his sword.

“I had thought to give this stroke in vengeance,” he said somberly, “I give it in mercy – Vae, Caesar!”

The steel flashed in the eery light and Sulla's head rolled to the foot of the glowing altar, where it lay staring up at the shadowed sky.

"They did him no harm," Atla's hateful laugh slashed the sick silence, "It was what he saw, and came to know that broke his brain! This night he has been dragged through the deepest pits of Hell, where even you might have blenched, though you knew of the Children of old. The Roman had not guessed the existence of them. Like all his heavy-footed race, he knew nothing of the secrets of this ancient land. Now give them their Black Stone!"

A cataclysmic loathing shook Bran's soul with red fury.

"Aye, take your cursed Stone!" he roared, snatching it from the altar and hurling it among the shadows with a savage force that snapped bones. A hurried babel of grisly tongues rose and the thick shadows receded, flowing back and away from Bran like the foul waters of some black flood.

"Go back to Hell and take your idol with you!" he yelled, brandishing his clenched fists to the skies, "Gonar was right – there are shapes too foul to use against even Rome!"

He sprang from the Ring as a man flees the touch of a coiling snake, and tore the stallion free, wheeling the great horse about. At his elbow Atla was shrieking with fearful laughter.

"Kings of Pictland!" she cried, "King of fools! You blench at a little thing – stay and let me show you the real fruit of the pits! Ha! ha! ha! Run, fool, run! But you are stained with the taint – you have called them forth and they will remember! And in their own time they will come to you again!"

"The curse of R'lyeh on you, witch!" he yelled, and struck her savagely in the mouth with his open hand. She staggered, blood starting from her lips, but her fiendish laughter only rose higher.

Bran leaped into the saddle, wild for the clean heather and the cold blue hills of the north where he could plunge his sword into clean slaughter and his sickened soul into forgetfullness in the red storm of forthright battle. And forget the horror which lurked below the fens of the west. He gave the frantic stallion the rein, and rode through the night like a hunted ghost until the hellish laughter of the howling were-woman died out in the darkness behind him.

Fragment

Fragment

A grey sky arched over the dreary waste. The dry tall grass rippled in the cold wind; but for this no hint of movement stirred the primeval quietude of the level land, which ran to the low mountains rearing bleak and barren. In the center of this waste and desolation one lonely figure moved – a tall gaunt man who partook of the wildness of his surroundings. The wolfishness of his appearance was increased by his horned helmet and rusty mail-shirt. His lank hair was yellow, his scarred face sinister. Now he wheeled suddenly, his lean hand on his sword, as another man stepped suddenly from behind a clump of leafless trees. The two faced each other, tensed for anything. The new-comer fitted into the desolate scene even more perfectly than the other. Every line of his lean hard body betokened the wild savagery that had molded it. He was of medium height, but his shoulders were broad, and he was built with the savage economy of a wolf. His face was dark and inscrutable, his eyes gleaming like black ice. Like the first man he wore helmet and mail-shirt. And he was the first to speak.

“I give you greetings, stranger. I am Partha Mac Othna. I am on a mission for my leige – I bear words of friendship from Bran Mak Morn, king of Pictdom, to the chiefs of the Red-beards.”

The tall man relaxed and a grin twisted his bearded lips.

“I hail you, good sir. I am called Thorvald the Smiter, and until a day agone I was chief of a long-serpent and a goodly band of Vikings. But the storms cast my ship upon a reef and all my crew went to glut Fafnir except myself. I am seeking to reach the settlements on Caithness.”

Each smiled and nodded curteously, and each knew the other lied.

“Well it would be might we travel together,” said the Pict, “but my way lies to the west; and your’s to the east.”

Thorvald assented and stood, leaning on his sheathed sword, as the Pict strode away. Just out of sight the Pict glanced back and lifted his hand in salute and the impassive Norseman returned the gesture. Then as the other vanished over a slight rise, Thorvald grinned savagely and went swiftly in a course that

slanted slowly eastward, swinging along with tireless strides of his long legs.

The man who had called himself Partha Mac Othna did not go far before he turned suddenly aside and slid silently into a brown leafless copse. There he waited grimly, his sword ready. But the grey clouds rolled and drifted overhead, the cold wind blew across the rattling grass, and no stealthy shape came gliding on his trail. He rose at last and swept the bleak landscape with his keen black eyes. Far away to the east he saw a tiny figure momentarily etched against the grey clouds on the crest of a hill. And the black-haired wanderer shrugged his shoulders and took up his journey.

The land grew wilder and more rugged. His way lay among low sloping hills bare except for the brown dead grass. To the left the grey sea boomed along the cliffs and the grey stone promontories. To his right the mountains rose dark and grim. Now as the day drew to a close, a strong wind from the sea rolled the clouds in flying grey scrolls and drove them torn and scattered over the world-rim. The sinking sun blazed in a cold crimson glow over the reddening ocean, and the wanderer came up upon a high promontory that jutted high above the sea, and saw a woman sitting on a grey boulder, her red hair blown in the wind.

She drew his eyes as a magnet draws steel. Indifferent to the chill of the wind she sat there, her only garments a scant kirtle which left her arms bare and came barely to her knees, and leather sandals on her feet. A short sword hung at her girdle.

She was almost as tall as the man who watched her, and she was broadly built and deep-bosomed. Her hair was red as the sunset and her eyes were cold and strange and magnetic. The Romans who represented the world’s civilization would not have called her beautiful, but there was a wild something about her which held the eyes of the Pict. Her own eyes gave back his stare boldly.

“What evil wind brings you into this land, feeder of ravens?” she asked in no friendly tone.

The Pict scowled, antagonized by her manner.

“What is that to you, wench?” he retorted.

“This is my land,” she answered, sweeping the bleak magnificence with a bold sweep of her strong white arm, “my people claim this land and own no master. It is my right to ask of any intruder, ‘What do you here?’”

“Its not my custom to give an account of myself to every hussy I happen to meet,” growled the warrior, nettled.

“Who are you?” how her hair glinted in the dying glow of the sun.

“Partha Mac Othna.”

“You lie!” she rose lithely and came up to him, meeting his scowling black eyes unflinchingly, “You come into the land to spy.”

“My people have no quarrel with the Red Beards,” he growled.

“Who knows against whom you plot or where your next raid falls?” she retorted, then her mood changed and a vagrant gleam rose in her eyes.

“You shall wrestle with me,” she said, “Nor go from this spot unless you overcome me.”

He snorted disgustedly and turned away but she caught his girdle and detained him with surprizing strength.

“Do you fear me, my black slayer?” she taunted me, “Are Picts so cowed by the emperor that they fear to wrestle with a woman of the Red People?”

“Release me, wench,” he snarled, “before I lose patience and hurt you.”

“Hurt me if you can!” she retorted, suddenly flinging her full weight against his chest and back-heeling him at the same instant. Caught off-guard by the unexpected movement, the warrior went down ingloriously, half smothered by a flurry of white arms and legs. Cursing luridly he strove to thrust her aside, but she was like a big she-cat, and with strong and cunning wrestling tricks she more than held her own for an instant. But the superior strength of the warrior was not to be denied and casting her angrily aside, her antagonist rose. But she, springing to her knees, caught his sword-belt and almost dragged him down again, and irritated beyond control, the Pict jerked her savagely to her feet by her red locks and gave her a terrific cuff with his open hand that felled her senseless at his feet. Swearing in disgust and wrath, he turned away, brushing the dust from his garments, then glanced at the motionless form of the girl and hesitated. Then with an oath he knelt beside her and lifted her head, flinging the contents of his canteen in her face. She started, shook her head and looked up, clear-eyed and fully concious. He instantly released her and let her head bump none too gently against the frosty ground as he rose to his feet and replaced his canteen.

She sat up cross-legged and looked up at him.

“Well, you have conquered me,” she said calmly, “What will you do with me now?”

“I should rip the skin from your loins with my sword-belt,” he snapped, “It is no small shame to a warrior to be forced into striving with a woman – and no small shame to the woman who thrusts herself into a man’s game.”

“I am no common woman,” she answered, “I am one with the winds and the frosts and the grey seas of this wild land.

Poem

Previously Unpublished

There’s a bell that hangs in a hidden cave

Under the heathered hills

That knew the tramp of the Roman feet

And the clash of the Pictish bills.

It has not rung for a thousand years,

To waken the sleeping trolls,

But God defend the sons of men

When the bell of the Morni tolls.

For its rope is caught in the hinge of hell,

And its clapper is forged of doom,

And all the dead men under the sea

Await for its sullen boom.

It did not glow in an earthly fire,

Or clang to a mortal’s sledge;

The hands that cast it grope in the night

Through the reeds at the fen-pool’s edge.

It is laden with dooms of a thousand years,

It waits in the silence stark,

With grinning dwarves and the faceless things

That crawl in the working dark.

And it waits the Hand that shall wake its voice,

When the hills shall break with fright,

To call the dead men into the day,

And the living into the Night.

Untitled

Introduction

Early in 2004, Wandering Star editor Patrice Louinet, studying Robert E. Howard’s early manuscripts and typescripts in his search for clues that would help in dating the author’s work, received a package of materials he had requested from Glenn Lord. Lord owns the largest collection of original Howard manuscripts. Among these was a typescript that had been listed in the

“Unpublished Fiction” section of his landmark bio-bibliography of Howard, *The Last Celt,* under the title “The Wheel Turns.”

As he read it, Louinet was excited to discover that this was without doubt the “novel” that Howard had referred to in a 1923 letter to his friend Clyde Smith (see page 324). While Glenn Lord had read the typescript more than thirty years ago, it was not until years later that Howard’s letters to Smith had become available, so the connection had never been made.

Howard told Smith that the novel featured Bran Mak Morn. Unfortunately, alone among the characters Howard named in the letter, Bran does not appear in the typescript that has come to us. Perhaps his section was to come later. There is a Pict featured in one segment of this story, but his name is Merak. While the Pictish element of this tale is slight, we thought readers would enjoy this glimpse at a very early work of Robert E. Howard. At the very least, the letter to Smith indicates that Howard *intended* to bring Bran into this story!

We have adhered closely to Howard’s typescript. No attempt has been made to correct spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. What follows here is the tale exactly as Howard wrote it.

Untitled

Chapter 1,
Back Through the Ages.

Men have had visions ere now. Men have dreamed dreams. Faint glimpses of other worlds and other ages have come to us, as though for a moment the veil of Time had been rent and we had peered fearfully into the awful vistas.

Scant and fleeting those glimpses, not understood. And from them men have have shaped heaven and hell.

Little they knew that it was but the stirring of memory, memory transmitted from age to age, surviving the changing and shifting of centuries. Memory, that is as strong as the soul of man.

Time has no beginning or ending. The Wheel turns and the cycles revolve for ever. The Wheel turns and the souls of all things are bound to the spokes

through all Eternity.

Form and substance fades but the Invisible Something, the ego, the Soul, swings on through the eons. It is as beginningless, as endless as Time Itself. These visions, these dreams, these instincts and inspirations, they are but memories, racial memories.

To some comes clearness of vision, of memory. Shall I say I have dreamed? No, for they were not dreams, the glimpses I had of Eternity.

For Eternity I have seen, the Ages of long ago and the future Ages. For as sure as I have lived before and as sure as I shall live again, I have drawn back the veil of Time and gazed clear-eyed into the Centuries. Glimpses I had in my youth, in child-hood, in infancy. Fleet snatches I caught, in dreams, in the Mystic Bowl of the Orient, in the Crystal.

But in manhood my clearest sight was reached, in manhood, when I purchased, for ten times its weight in gold, the Mystic Plant of the Orient.

In the waste place of the Orient it grows scantily, and from a wandering Hindu faquir I purchased a small quantity.

“Taduka,” I shall call it, although it is not Taduka nor is it anything known to or by, white men.

It is not an opiate, nor is its effect harmful in the least. It is to be smoked and when smoked, the world of today fades from about me and I travel back into the Ages or forward into the Future. Years, space, distance, time, are nothing. I have covered a million miles with the speed of light and a thousand years in as many seconds.

I have traversed empty space, from world to world. I have passed from Age to Age.

I have lived Centuries and Centuries on Centuries.

Sights I have seen and leagues on leagues have I traversed, in seconds time, for the effects of Taduka does not last many minutes, an hour at the utmost. A boon to humanity it would be, greater than the greatest inventions, greater than the written annals of history, and withal, absolutely harmless. Indeed, beneficient is Taduka.

So I have lived again the by-gone Ages of other lands.

And so it is that I, Stephen Hegen, knowing that the average human mind does not believe what it cannot conceive, and knowing that the conception of Mystery lies beyond the average human mind, yet I set down these, shall I call them adventures ? of mine.

I was a man in the Younger World. I lived in the trees and my only clothing was the thick, shaggy hair that grew on my body. I was not a large man but I was terrificly powerful.

I travelled through the trees, leaping and swinging from bough to bough like any ape.

I lived on fruit and nuts and such birds as I could snare and I crept, silently and fearful, to the river for water, glancing swiftly from side to side, ready to flee.

I was Swift-Foot the Tree-man, in those early days and my name did not lie. Swift of foot, men had to be in those days. Many a time have I footed it to the trees or the cliffs with the Mighty One, the lion, or old saber-tooth, the tiger, bounding behind me, shaking the earth with roars.

Once among the trees, nothing could catch me, not even the leopard nor the Hairy Fierce One, the ape.

The Hairy People, we called them, we of the Trees, for they were but savage apes. Powerful they were, and terrible, and possessed of a nasty temper. We of the trees were much higher in the scale of evolution. We had a sense of humor, childish and grotesque, I grant you, yet still, a sense of humor. The Hairy People had no sense of humor, and since they were morose and savage and of a hermit nature, we of the Trees let them alone.

Mighty fighters they were; a full grown male of the Hairy People was ten times as strong as a man of today, and nearly twice as strong as a man of the Trees.

If they had had union, they might have wiped out the Tree People, but when they came to steal the women of the Tree People, as they sometimes did, they came singly or only in twos and threes.

We of the Trees had feuds and fights with one another but we always united against a common enemy. And not one or three or ten Hairy Men could

overcome the whole tribe of Tree People.

When a Tree Man was matched singly a Hairy Man, the Hairy Man almost invaribly came off victor.

Yet when a savage and powerful Hairy Man sought to carry off a girl of the Tree People whom I desired for a mate, I proved I was strong of arm as well as swift of foot.

For I saw red rage and there in the swaying tree-tops, a hundred feet from the ground, we fought, hand to hand, the Hairy Man and I, and bare-handed and unaided I slew him, there in tree-tops, when the world was young.

I was a slave in Egypt when Menes built the first pyramid. By day I toiled unceasingly with thousands of other slaves, working on the erection of the pyramids and at night I shared a squalid mud hut with other slaves.

I was tall and fair skinned and fair haired. One of the tribe of fair haired people who lived in caves on the coast of the Mediterranean. The ancestors of the Berbers of today.

I toiled without pause or rest and many a time I felt the slave-driver's lash, until I remembered that I had been a chief in mine own land. Then, laying hands on the slave-driver, I slew him and broke away, regaining my freedom with one bold stroke.

To Ethiopia I fled, and there I became a chief of fighting men. From power to power I rose, until the Karoon, the king of Ethiopia, jealous of my rising power, sought my life.

Again I fled, across the desert, until I came to a tribe of black men.

Fierce fighters they were, and they took me into their tribe. I led them to victory against other tribes and I was made a chief among them.

When we had conquered the tribes' enemies, I led an army of some two thousand out of the jungle, across the desert and into Ethiopia.

The black tribesmen were spearmen. They knew nothing of the bow and the Ethiopians were all skilled archers, and they greatly outnumbered us. But I led them skillfully and we fell upon the Ethiopians, surprizing them and closing in so swiftly that they had scant time to use their bows. In hand-to-hand fighting the Ethiopians could not stand before the fierce speamen and

they broke and fled.

The Karoon, the king of Ethiopia, was slain in battle and I put myself on the Ethiopian throne.

Ethiopia became powerful under my rule and the Egyptians were forced to double their frontier armies.

I trained the armies of Ethiopia and I invaded Egypt. The Egyptian armies were hurled back and the Egyptian cities fell before the onslaught of my Ethiopian bowmen and savage black spearmen.

I conquered Egypt and for a time I reigned on the throne of the nation in which I had been a slave.

But the Egyptians rose against me and I was forced to flee to Ethiopia.

But no Egyptian army ever successfully invaded Ethiopia during my reign and I was content with the kingdom of Ethiopia for I made it into a mighty nation, supreme in that part of Africa.

I was a Pict and my name was Merak. I was a wiry man of medium height, with very black hair and very black eyes.

My tribe lived in wattle huts on the east coast of Britain. It was not known as Britain then, for the Brythons had not yet given the island its name.

My people were artizans, then, not warriors. We hunted a little and tilled the soil and were a peaceful people.

I sat before the door of my hut, fashioning a spear of bronze.

Before the Gaelic invasion, the Picts made their weapons and implements of skillfully fashioned flint and obsidian and jade.

But the first Celts had come from Hibernia and had settled in Britain, bringing with them the first metal ever seen by the Picts of the island. The Gaels had not conquered Britain entirely, by any means, nor did they ever entirel subjugate the Picts.

We were artizans and we were not warriors but we were cunning and skilled in crafts of many kinds.

As I fashioned the spear I glanced up, to see Mea-lah, the daughter of one of

the chief's councilors, passing.

I was aware of large, dark, beautiful eyes gazing into mine. Just an instant and then the girl had walked on.

I watched her, a vague yearning filling my soul.

Mea-lah's eyes were very beautiful, her skin was as softly white as snow. Her soft, dark hair rippled down over her slim, snowy shoulders. She tripped lightly along on dainty feet that seemed scarcely to touch the ground.

She was going toward the sea-shore and presently I saw her slight form outlined against the cloud-flecked sky. She was standing upon a great rock, gazing sea-ward, her rippling hair floating in the sea-breeze.

A dainty, lovely thing, scarce more than a girl-child – and she was to marry the son of the chief.

Had those beautiful eyes seen in me more than a common artizan of the village? Had there been a certain wistfullness in their gaze?

I, but an ordinary Pictish tribesman, he, the son of the chief of the tribe – yet I had seen her shrink from him.

He was a cruel man, was Neroc, son of the chief and Mea-lah was made to be caressed and used tenderly. But her father was councilor –

I shrugged my shoulders and bent to work on the spear.

But now and again I looked up, to gaze at Mea-lah, standing on the rock by sea-shore.

From the sea came merchants, in those days, and traders. Tyrians and Phoenecians from Spain.

We were not a sea-faring people, but to us the sea was all that was strange and romantic, for the merchants and traders told us of lands afar off and of strange people and strange seas.

Mea-lah had always spent much time on the sea-shore, playing with the wavelets, tripping about the beach or lying upon the sand, gazing toward the blue haze that marked the far horrizon, dreaming dreams.

And I watched the girl dumbly, dreaming my own dreams, yearning for her.

And one I came to the door of my wattle hut, to see strange, long, black ships sweeping in from the sea. Long oars and sail swept them them swiftly forward. And they were crowded with men strange to us, huge, fierce men, with winged helmets and fair hair and long, fair, beards, who shook spears and long swords and roared strange, heathen, war-cries.

The ships swung inshore. These were no Phoenecian traders, no African merchants. They were warriors, pirates, from the far North.

They were Norsemen, Vikings. Some of the first of the fierce races that harried the coasts of Britain for centuries after.

They swept down on the Pictish village with fire and sword.

The Picts were not warriors. They could not stand before the giant Vikings with their iron and bronze armor and their great swords.

We fled from the village, men, women and children, the men but seeking to cover the retreat of the women and children.

The Norsemen took the offensive, ever, hurling themselves into the battle with a recklessness that the Picts had never seen equalled. The Picts, on the other hand, fought only on the defensive, ever retreating, and when the women and the children had found safety in the forest, the Pictish men broke away and fled in every direction. Many of them were cut down, among them Neroc, the chief’s son.

I was making for the forest, with some speed, glancing back from time to time toward the village, where the Norsemen were tearing the wattle huts to pieces in search of loot and women who might be hiding.

Some of them were leaping and branishing their weapons in some kind of a wild dance, others roaring uncouth war-songs, others applying the torch to the huts.

Nearer to me were scattered groups of warriors, pursuing the fleeing Pictish men and any Pictish women who had not dissapeared into the forest.

The screams of women rose above the clash of swords and the savage war-cries.

And then I heard my name called.

“Merak! Merak!”

And I saw who called me. Mea-lah struggled in the arms of a huge Norseman who carried her as if she was an infant.

Her beautiful dark eyes were wide, her lovely face white with terror and the horror of fear. Her soft arms were out-streched to me, appealingly, imploringly.

And I saw the red mist of rage and charged the Norseman, silently, savagely.

The Norseman, turning, saw but a Pict armed with a long bronze dagger, rushing at him.

With a roaring laugh, he shifted the struggling girl, and holding her helpless under one mighty arm, with the other raised a great sword to exterminate the presumptious Pictish fool that dared to charge a Norseman.

He was arrogantly over-confident and could not have gaged the speed at which I was coming. The great sword had scarcely reached the highest point of its upward arc, when I darted in under his arm and stabbed him thrice, driving the dagger through crevices in his corselet of iron.

With a bellow he staggered backward, his sword spinning from his grasp. He crashed to the ground, his thick, yellow beard pointing upward, the girl dropping from his arms as he fell.

I snatched her up and pushed her toward the forest. Without pausing to see whether sh made for it or not, I turned to meet the rush of three other Norsemen, who were charging down upon me with savage shouts.

But I had learned one thing. I was much quicker than the Norsemen and lighter on my feet.

As they swept down upon me, I ducked under the side-swing of a sword and tripped the wielder so that he fell sprawling. The flat of another’s sword struck me a staggering blow across the head but I rallied and lunging forward, I plunged my dagger to the hilt in the Norseman’s breast, wrenching it out as he fell.

The other Viking had stopped several yards away and was poising a long spear over his shoulder to throw.

I flung my dagger with all my force against his breast. As he lunged forward he hurled the spear but the shaft only struck me a glancing blow on the forest.

I staggered and someone caught me, supporting me. It was Mea-lah.

My senses were reeling, but I caught her by the hand and we fled into the forest.

The Norsemen did not care to follow the Picts into the thick forest and soon we were safe.

Then I leaned against a great tree, spent and weak, but happy.

And then I felt soft arms about my neck, soft hair falling about my face and rippling down over my shoulders, a soft, slender, girl-ish form clinging and nestling in my arms, soft lips against mine. Mea-lah.

I was Lakur the archer in the land of Kita. We were a war-like people and many and many a time have I marched through the great gates of Carchemish, with hundreds and sometimes thousands, of bowmen and swordmen and spearmen and chariot drivers.

We fought in defense of our country, for the most part, and we had wars enough at that.

Sometimes the armies came back through the great gates of Carchemish, straggling, defeated; more often with long trains of loot-filled wains and captives, strong men, handsome children and young women for slaves.

In the first-mentioned event, old men and women and the soldiers of the city manned the wall and prepared to hold the city.

In the latter, the whole great populace turned out and made a gala day and the loot was distributed and the slaves sold.

Speaking of slaves, there was a proverb, “Better a slave among the Hittites than a free man in Assyria.”

For we Hittites were famous for our mild treatment of prisoners and slaves. Fierce and savage we were in war, but in peace we were a fair and just people. We had none of the Semitic cruelty, and we were of a different race than the other tribes of Canaan.

It is not recorded in history that captives taken in war begged to be sold among the Hittites but it is the truth.

It was no law that caused the indulgence of slaves, but the leniency of the Hittite nature. I cannot explain why the Hittites were more kindly disposed than the other tribes of Canaan but the fact remains that they were.

Once we marched through the gates of Carchemish to oppose a mighty army that came from the East across the desert, laying waste the country as they came.

Assyrians they were, the warriors of of the fiercest and most war-like nation that early Asia ever knew.

They were led by a great general, a mighty man of valour, whose skill was so great that few tribes dared resist his army, and whose savage cruelty surpassed his skill and valour.

Where e’re the Assyrian army went, looting, murder, fire and rapine were. They slew men, women and children, sparing only the most beautiful of the young women for slaves and concubines.

They were, for a time, the lords of Asia, except for the Hittites.

We marched to meet the Assyrian army and we met it leagues from Khita. Such was the custom of the Hittites, never to fight a battle within their boundaries, and thus spare the people of Khita the horrors of an invading army, and in case of defeat to give them time to gain walled cities.

We did not join battle at once with the Assyrians. Our camp was pitched on a slope, theirs on the plains; and the plain was white with their tents.

They greatly outnumbered us, but we held the stragetic position, for at the foot of the slope whereon we camped, were many ravines and gulchs and huge boulders.

The Assyrians did not care to attack us there until they had supplied themselves with provisions and had looked to their weapons. Not for nothing had the Hittites held their own against all hostile nations for more than eight hundred years.

Nor did we care to sally out against them so we rested and raised fortifications and strung bows and sharpened swords and the Assyrians looted

and ravaged on the plain and the smoke of burning cities and villages rose to the skies with the screeches of murdered men and children and the screams of women.

With the coming of the dark Asian night, many scouts and spies stole forth from the Hittite camp to spy among the Assyrians, to learn their numbers and if possible their plans.

I, Lakur the bowman, was one the spies.

It was a difficult business and full of risk for the spies. The Assyrians had many sentries stationed about the camp and some of the Hittites were discovered and went down, fighting, beneath the Assyrian sword.

But some of them gained the Assyrian camp and among them, I.

I entered the camp stealthily, now gliding noiselessly from shadow to shadow, now creeping forward on my hands and knees, now lying flat, scarcely daring to breathe as an Assyrian passed close by.

At last I found myself close to a large tent which seemed the pavilion of some chief.

I crept close to it, keeping ever in its shadow and daring greatly, cut a small slit in the cloth with my dagger.

Peering in with great caution, I saw that the tent was occupied by three or four women, one of them a captive, the others slaves but Assyrian women.

There was a stake driven into the dirt floor of the tent and beside this the captive woman crouched, her wrists bound to the stake. She was little more than a girl, a slender, beautiful girl, who, for her aristocratic features and daintiness, might have been the daughter of a great chieftain or a king.

Her eyes were wide with terror and her golden hair fell in confusion about her bare shoulders. Her single, robe-like garment was torn in places and a bruise showed on her soft round arm, showing that she had been roughly used.

As I watched, the tent-flap parted and an Assyrian warrior strode in. He was a chief, a tall, large man, heavily bearded, with a harsh, cruel face. The captive girl shrank away from him with a low cry of fright.

He smiled cruelly and drove the slave women from the tent.

Then he approached the girl and unbinding her hands, raised her to her feet.

I could not understand their language but I could tell that she was pleading frantically, piteously. The Assyrian only laughed at her.

He drew her close to him and kissed her roughly, again and again. Then he thrust her from him with such force that she fell prostrate on the tent-floor. She lay there, her slim form shaken with sobs. The Assyrian sneered and lifting her again in his arms, crushed her to him, gazing lustfully into her eyes, ignoring her weeping and pleas.

I wondered how any man could find it in him to mis-use so dainty and helpless a girl as she.

But cruelty was a predominant trait of the the Assyrians. The Assyrian was but playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse.

The girl's hand, pushing against her captor, as she struggled in his arms as her bore her to a couch in the corner of the tent, touched the hilt of a dagger in his girdle.

Instantly she snatched it out and tried to stab the Assyrian with it. But he was too quick for her. He wrested the dagger from her hand and flung it across the tent. Then, his expression changed from sneering laughter to cruel rage, he hurled her to the tent-floor at his feet.

He snatched up a chariot-whip and with one savage jerk, tore the girl's garment from her body, and brought the whip down across her soft, snowy shoulders. A red welt appeared upon her dainty skin but she did not cry out. She only hid her face in her hands and waited, shuddering, for the next blow.

The Assyrian's treatment of his fair captive had angered me, but I had interfered for I felt I could not chance discovery by the camp. But now my rage was too much.

Gloating over the girl and deciding where the whip would strike next, the Assyrian did not hear the cloth of the tent part as I ripped a seven foot slash. He did not me as I charged silently across the tent. I was nearly upon him before he turned.

His eyes went wide and then narrowed to slits as he saw me.

"A Hittite!" he hissed as he snatched a short sword from his girdle. Before he

could use it, my dagger glittered in the light of the tent as I struck once.

The Assyrian swayed and pitched backward, his sword falling from his hand.

A moment I stood over him, alert for any sound. But I heard none except the sound of the warriors gambling and revelling in other tents or by the great camp-fires.

I turned to the girl. She was still crouching, gazing first at me and then at the body of the Assyrian. Her eyes lighted as she saw he could harm her no more, and then filled with doubt as she looked at me.

I raised her to her feet and spoke reassuringly to her and though she did not understand my language, some of the fear faded from her lovely face. Then she glanced at herself and her cheeks went crimson and she averted her eyes with shame.

A long cloak such as Assyrian chiefs wore lay on a couch and I picked it up and draped it about the girl.

Then I went to the front of the tent and peered out. No one was near. Replacing my dagger and drawing my short sword, I took the girl by the hand and motioning for silence, led her through the slit I had made in the tent. Her presence would hamper my escape, but what sense or right would there have been to have rescued her from one Assyrian and to have left her in the power of several thousand of them?

Silently we made our way in the direction I led. I had seen groups of horses tied here and there within the camp and it was toward some of them that I was making my way.

We had much a-do to avoid the warriors and stay out of the lights of the fires but at last we reached a place where several horses were tethered. Two Assyrians sat near, dicing.

Chancing all upon one cast, I caught up the girl with one arm and landed amongst the horses with a single panther leap.

They reared and plunged but the tethers held and in an instant I was on the back of one, holding the girl close. With three slashes of my sword I parted the tethers and the next moment was doing my best to keep my seat as my horse stampeded wildly across the camp with the others.

The Assyrians had sat, gaping at me, almost dazed by my sudden appearance and swift actions. But now their presence of mind returned and they sprang up, shouting wildly.

In a moment the whole camp was in an up-roar. Men rushing about, shouting, (as I learned after) some that there was mutiny in the camp, some that the Hittites were upon them.

Men slashed at me with swords and a few arrows were aimed at me. But fire-light is deceptive and I passed through the entire Assyrian camp without having received a scratch. Neither had the horse nor the girl.

As I dashed past the last line of tents, I was aware that someone was close behind me, on a horse and riding like the wind.

Half turning I raised my sword but the horseman swept up beside me and I could see he was unarmed.

“Keep your sword for Assyrians!” he shouted, in the tongue of Khita, “I am your friend whether you are Hittite, Bashanite, or devil! All I ask is to accompany you.”

I could tell he was no Assyrian.

“Come if you wish.” I answered.

That was a ride! I shall never forget it.

A ride worth remembering, it was, sweeping along on a horse scarce less swift than the night-wind that struck against my face, blowing about my face and my shoulders the soft hair of the girl I carried before me; and and the strange horseman riding at my elbow.

A wild ride and the stranger made it still wilder by chanting a barbaric war-cry until I bade him be silent lest he betray us to the Assyrians.

I had no desire to recieve an arrow from a sentry of my own nation nor did I wish to throw the camp into a panic.

So instead of riding straight for the Khitan camp, I sheered off and circled about it, stopping at a point some distance from the camp and a greater distance from the Assyrian camp, of course, though not as distant as I could have wished.

I dismounted and lifted the girl from the horse. She clung to me and I knew she was frightened. I tried to reassure her as best I knew and then spoke to the stranger, “We will await here until dawn and then enter the Hittite camp.”

“Good.” he answered.

We staked out the horses and then made ourselves as comfortable as we could among a group of great boulders that afforded warmth from the chill night air as well as a hiding place from the Assyrians.

The stranger and I sat facing each other, with our backs against a boulder. The girl huddled close to me, shuddering at every faint sound that came from the distant Assyrian camp. The poor child was very much afraid but she seemed to have perfect trust in me.

In the darkness I could not see the features of the stranger and I wondered what manner of man he might be. We talked in low tones.

“Whoever you are,” he said with a chuckle, “and what your mission was in that camp of Assyrian devils, I doubtless owe you my life. Indeed, an Assyrian was lifting his sword against me when those horses bolted through camp, knocked down the Assyrian and scattered the others who held me. So I leaped on the back of one of the horses, first knocking down two or three Assyrians so they would remember me, and and rode for it. I percieved you riding out of camp at a speed which seemed to indicate that you were not greatly welcome, so I decided to throw in my lot with you. For the time being, at least.” then with a slight change of tone, “The pretty little Assyrian seems to come willing enough or have you frightened her into submission?”

I saw that he thought the girl was an Assyrian woman whom I had carried off forcibly.

“The girl is no Assyrian,” I answered, “nor did I abduct her. She was a captive of the Assyrians and I rescued her, slaying her captor.”

“Good.” he applauded softly, “You are a Hittite, I percieve from you speech.”

“Yes, I am Lakur, a bowman of Carchemish. And you –”

“My name is Ammon,” he replied, “and I am an Amalekite.”

“An Amalekite? Then what do you so far north?”

“I am something of a wanderer.” he replied, whimsically, “I have always a craving to see new places and strange lands. I was fighting in the army of of Babylon when I was captured by those Assyrian devils.”

And so we talked, telling each other tales of war and camp-life and cities and nations, speaking in low tones so as not to awake the girl who slumbered in my arms.

I told him of the great nation of Khita and the mighty city of Carchemish and he told me of his land which lay on the border of the desert of Shur. He told me of wars with the Philistines and the Amorites and the Canaanites and Midianites. He told me of the Salt Sea in the land of the Amorites and of the Gulf of Akaba and of the deset of Zin on whose borders dweldt the the Canaanitish giants. He told me of the cites of Horeb and Kadesh and Gaza and Askalon and Babylon.

He was not boastful in his speech, although he had traveled farther and seen more sights and strange lands and had taken part in more battles than any other man I had ever seen.

He had the gift of speech, likewise, and in the mere telling of a tale he made it so plain that his listener straightway had a picture in his mind of what the Amalekite related.

He was a North-Amalekite, one of the tribes who dwell in Canaan, between the desert of Shur and the desert of Zin. The South-Amalekites had their home in the mountains of the desert of Paran, north of the land of the Midianites. I had heard of the Amalekites but Ammon was the first I had met. I had heard that they were wild tribesmen, savage in battle but peaceable if let alone.

As dawn began to lighten the rugged land-scape of the desert, we made ready to go to the Hittite camp. In the light I saw that Ammon was fairly tall, lithe built man, with a true fighting-man’s build, broad of shoulder, narrow of hip and long of arm. His forehead was high and broad, showing a high intellect and his eyes were clear and seemed dancing with merriment and good humor. Altogether Ammon the Amalekite was a handsome man and I had never seen a man whose appearance I liked better.

We awoke the girl. She started up, a look of fright in her lovely eyes, but smiled when she saw me and held out her hands to me like a trustful child. She stared curiously at Ammon the Amalekite.

“Truly she is no Assyrian.” he commented, “Nor is she Hittite, Bashanite nor Babylonian.”

He spoke to her in several different languages and at last it seemed he used one she could understand. Her face lighted and she answered. They conversed for awhile and then Ammon turned to me.

“She is a princess of Cilicia.” he said, “She was journeying to Agade, to wed the lesser king there, when she and her escort were set upon by a raiding band of Assyrians. She was captured and brought along with the Assyrian army.”

So the girl I had carried before me on a half-wild Assyrian horse, the girl who had slept in my arms, was a princess. I marveled that I, Lakur, a common archer in the army of Carchemish, should been priveleged to so much as touch a person of royal lineage. I felt diffident about carrying her as I had but there was no other way so soon we were under way, the girl sitting the horse sideways, her arms about my shoulders. And when she smiled I felt strangely at ease.

Without incident we reached the Hittite camp. The princess I gave in charge of a general, who was pleased to aid her, as by doing so we might gain an alliance with Cicilia.

Then I sought out the company of archers of which I was a member.

Ammon expressed his wish to join in the battle so I asked him, “With whom do you wish to fight? Are you a bowmen, spearman or what?”

“Give me a sword,” he responded, “a sword and a horse and let me fight among the horsemen.”

I had him accompany me to my captain, Gurom, to whom I told Ammon’s wishes.

“A horse you shall have.” Gurom answered, “When the Assyrians march against us we will need stout warriors, I think. As for swords, take your choice.”

And he motioned to a rack filled with weapons. Ammon’s eyes sparkled as he examined the weapons rapidly. He selected a long, narrow-bladed, double edged sword, a Midianite sword, I think it was.

With an exclamation of satisfaction he whirled the sword until it sang and

seemed a circle of glittering steel.

The Assyrians advanced with a blair of trumpets and a clashing of armor. There were thousands on thousands of them. The heavily-armed footmen came first, flanked on either side by the heavy cavalry. Behind these came the chariots of war and the lighter-armed footmen. Light-armed horsemen skirmished about the plain.

Slowly the great army surged forward like waves of steel.

Not a shout from the Hittite army, not a a trumpet-blast. Not an arrow was discharged, not a spear was hurled until the Assyrians had almost reached the great boulders at the foot of the slope. Then, in answer to an order given in the form of a spear flashing in the air, the air was filled with arrows raining upon the Assyrians. Still they came on, raising their shields against the arrows. They reached the boulders and the formation was broken as the first ranks of the army entered the gulchs and ravines. And then upon them leaped the Hittite spearmen and swordsmen who had lain concealed there.

Leaping and advancing and retreating to advance again, the Hittites plied swords and battle-axes and hurled heavy spears at close-range while higher up on the slope the light-armed footmen hurled javelins and throwing spears and still higher the bowmen, shooting high over the heads of their people, rained down flight after flight of arrows upon the Assyrians.

Unused to such fighting, the Assyrians gave way. They fled from the slope and reforming on the plain, advanced again. Horsemen and chariots were useless among the boulders so it was only the footmen who could be sent against us. And again and again our men broke the Assyrian power and drove them back. At last scouts came with the news that part of the Assyrian army was making a detour to mount the slope at a point distant from the battle-field and thus attack us from the rear. Then while the Assyrian army was divided, the king of Khita made his bold stroke.

He gave the order to form for a charge. Swiftly the boulders blocking the roads we had built were rolled away. Arriving before the Assyrians, and working under the cover of night, we had in a fashion, smoothed and levelled out roads down the slope which would allow chariots and horsemen to descend. The Assyrians were not aware of this for we had blocked the roads with great boulders. They thought we were no more able to hurl the full strength of our horsemen and chariots against them than they were us.

Thus it was with the utmost amazement that they saw the whole Hittite army

careering down the slope toward them, at reckless speed.

The archers followed swiftly, discharging flights of arrows as they ran. A band of horsemen whirled past my company. Among them, riding like a whirlwind was Ammon the Amalekite. He had been fighting with the Hittites among the boulders and his sword was already red.

“Ho!” he shouted as he whirled past me, swinging his sword, “This is the way to fight! Not like foxes among the rocks!”

Coming as they did down that slope, at a speed like that of the wind, the chariots and horsemen of Khita struck the Assyrian army. Many a horse and rider went down, many a chariot plunged downward on that slope but the chariots that remained drove right through the Assyrian ranks and the Hittite horsemen swept in behind them.

Behind them came the heavy-armed footmen, then the light-armed footmen, then the archers.

That was a battle! For the Assyrians, rallying under the orders of that fiendish general of theirs, fought like devils and almost turned defeat into victory.

From two ranked battle-lines the battle became a surging, mingled mélee, in which chariot, horsemen, footmen and archers were mingled without order or formation.

I found myself in the midst of the battle, fighting with short sword and dagger. Such close, hand-to-hand fighting was not to my liking and I was getting the worst of the conflict, being hemmed in by three Assyrian swordsmen when a tall, pantherish warrior, smashed his way through the battle-press. With three flashing, lightning-quick thrusts he disposed of the three Assyrians and I saw it was Ammon the Amalekite. His sword was red from point to hilt, his shield and helmet were dented and battered and he was bleeding from sword-cuts about his arms and a slight cut on his cheek. But his eyes were dancing with enjoyment.

“A great battle!” he shouted swinging up his his shield in time to catch a descending sword and thrusting the Assyrian through. A spear he turned aside with his sword and at the same time dashed his shield into the face of the Assyrian who wielded the spear with such force that man pitched backward.

“That devil of a general begins to rally the Assyrians!” he shouted, “We are lost unless we can smash this part of the army before the other part comes

down the slope upon us."

For a moment the space about us was cleared as the battle swirled away.

"Look!" shouted Ammon seizing my arm, "See the Assyrian fiend?" he pointed at a chariot some distance away. In it I saw a man. A chief he was, dressed in costly armor, with a long black beard and a look of such malign cruelty that even at the distance I shuddered.

"'Tis he!" Ammon shouted, "It is the Assyrian general!"

There were a few arrows left in my quiver. I selected one with care but hastily.

Sighting along the smooth shaft, I drew with all my strength. I loosed. Far and fast sped the arrow, upon it resting the rescue of the Hittite nation.

And the Assyrian flung wide his arms and plunged headlong from his chariot, as the arrow parted that long black beard and drove through his corselet of iron and bronze.

"Ho!" shouted Ammon the Amalekite. He whirled his sword high in the air.

"Ho!" he shouted again, "A wonder! A noble bowman are ye, Lakur the Hittite!"

And from the Assyrian ranks rose the shout, "Flee! The general is slain! The terrible Seni-Asshur is slain!"

"Rally, men of Khita!" shouted Ammon, "Rally and smite these Assyrians!"

And he leaped into the battle-press, his sword whirling and leaping like a flame.

The annals of Khita will tell you how the Hittites rallied under the commands of their general. How they hurled themselves with reckless valor against the wavering Assyrians and drove them back across the plain, defeated, their army shattered. How then the general of Khita swung the army about and met the charge of the other Assyrian army that was careering down the slope, and hurled back that army in defeat.

The annals of Khita will tell you how the remnants of that mighty and terrible Assyrian army fled back across the plain in swift retreat and how the Hittite

warriors marched back through the great gates of Carchemish with many prisoners and rich plunder, while the people rejoiced and made a gala day of it.

They will tell you of the cunning and daring of the Hittite general, of the might and daring of the warriors of Khita.

And all that is as it should be, for no mightier warriors, no more sagacious general, ever lived than the warriors and the general of Khita.

But I say, and say it without vainglorious boasting, that it was the arrow of I, Lakur the bowman, who won that battle for the Hittites and so says Ammon the Amalekite.

CHAPTER 2,
THE VIKING.

I dwelt in a land far to the north. It was cold there, with snow and driving sleet and screeching blizzards.

My people lived on the shores of a great sea and were a sea-faring folk. We were tall and strongly made, with flowing fair hair and the men wore heavy, fair beards. We were a war-like people and people who roamed the sea.

My name was Hakon and I differed from most of my tribe in that my hair was black and my eyes were grey.

I was a fair-sized man, but no giant such as were many of my people.

When a young man I went to one of the fiercest and most powerful sea-captains of that time, one Tostig the Mighty.

And mighty he was, a great, yellow bearded giant of a man, a terrible warrior and a man whose wish was his only law.

He towered inches higher than I, his winged helmet adding to his height, his hand resting, as if by habit, on the hilt of his great sword.

“You wish to join my crew?” he stared at me rather contemtously, “As you will, but do not join unless you are willing to fare far and fight many battles.”

He had two dragon-ships. He commanded one himself and the other was captained by a viking named Ragnar.

Swift, fierce-fought battles and rich plunder were ever for Tostig's men. We sailed recklessly out into the great seas, our long, low galley tossing like a chip on the waves but riding the highest seas stanchly.

Ships were not over-numerous upon the seas in those days, but we took every one we could over-haul and who was not too strong for us.

Phoenecian and Italian traders and merchants, other pirate ships, any ship was loot to us.

Nor were we averse to raiding inland. Many a village we looted in Alba, in Hibernia and in Britain.

There was a fierce old viking who had a skalli on the coast of Jutland. Every ship that passed that part of the coast was forced to pay toll.

Our dragon-ships swung around the out-jutting promontory where the old viking's skalli was.

Instantly a long, low dragon-ship came sweeping around the point of land and swept toward us.

Our two ships closed in on it and after a short skirmish at long range, the dragon-ship turned and made for the small bay from which it had come. We could see the viking's skalli upon the highest part of the promontory.

"After them!" thundered Tostig, "By Odin and Thor! We will sack the skalli!"

"Slowly, Tostig, slowly." quoth old Rane, "Perchance it is some trap. Erling is as cunning as a fox and 'tis well known that he posseses five dragon-ships. We have seen only one."

But Tostig was carried away by the lust of battle and the prospect of loot.

"I care not if old Erling hath an hundred dragon-ships crowded with men!" he shouted, "Steer for the bay, helmsman!"

Into the bay we drove, and there upon the beach where they had dragged her, lay the dragon-ship. But she was deserted.

"When we have looted and burned the skalli," quoth Tostig, "we will take the ship with us for she is a sound ship and a handsome one."

"But where are her men?" asked Sigurd, "And where are the other ships of

Erling?”

“This’s ship’s men have doubtless gone to defend the skalli.” answered old Rane, “As to the other ships, I have no idea.”

“They have fled.” Tostig answered, “They have all fled for they learned that Tostig the Mighty was coming to loot the skalli and the village.”

And just so many people fled at the coming of Tostig.

Little use it is to relate that battle at Erling’s skalli. We quit our ships and charged up the slope, yelling our war-cries.

The warriors and house-carls in the skalli fought boldly but we out-numbered them and we swarmed over the skalli-walls and in a short time our enemies were prisoners or had fled and a number were slain.

In the great hall of the skalli old Erling confronted us.

He had been disarmed and his hall was thronged with the armed vikings of Tostig the Mighty, but he glared at us defiantly and with haughty pride.

“But that my other four dragon-ships and most of my men were off on a raiding cruise, our places would be changed, Tostig.” said Erling.

“Ho, ho!” laughed Tostig, gustily, “High words for a captive! Had all your ships and all your vikings been here, I would have conquered just the same! I am Tostig, Tostig the Mighty and I am unconquerable!”

Erling glared at him with hate. Just at that moment a girl, Erling’s daughter, rushed into the room, pursued by some of Tostig’s men. She ran to her father and clung to him.

Tostig gazed at her.

“A fair girl.” he said, “I will take her.”

“You would not!” Erling cried.

“Why not?” queried Tostig, “I am Tostig the Mighty. What I wish, I take.” Then craftily, “What will you pay for your freedom and the girl’s?”

Erling was beaten and he knew. He spoke an order to a house-carl and presently slaves came into the hall, bearing hampers and armloads of treasure.

They dumped it all down on the long table. There were gold ornaments, bracelets, armlets, rings, there were piles of golden and silver coins, there costly weapons and armor and rich clothing.

“It is the wealth I have gathered from years of raiding and looting.” Erling said, “Take it all and depart.”

“Aye, we will do so.” said Tostig coolly, “It is a fair dower for your girl, Erling.”

The girl cried out and clung to her father. She was not like most of of our Norse women, for she was small and slender with a timid air and large, pleading violet eyes.

Erling glared at Tostig. “Villian!” he exclaimed, “You will take all this great treasure and break your vow? You are forsworn!”

“Nay,” Tostig said coolly, “I took no vow and you shall go free, Erling.”

And at that moment Sigurd dashed into the skalli.

“Away, away!” he shouted, “The ships of Erling are upon us! To sea!”

Instantly all was confusion. Tostig’s vikings rushed toward the door of the skalli, releasing the prisoners and snatching at whatever loot was handiest. Erling’s vikiings and house-carles fell upon the men of Tostig with shouts and war-cries, seeking to snatch weapons.

I had been edging toward the table where the loot was and I happened to be nearest to it. The house-carles leaped like tigers on Tostig and Erling caught up the girl and retreated toward the rear of the skalli.

“Hakon!” bellowed Tostig, scattering his assailants right and left with sweeps of his great sword, “Seize the girl and bear her away!”

“Fenris seize the girl and you also!” I yelled, springing to the table. Erling, backing away, swung the girl behind him, shouting for his men to rally about him. I paid no attention to him. I had no time for girls when loot was to be had. I snatched up a hamper filled with loot and fled for the door of the skalli.

Erling’s vikings sought to seize me and struck at me with swords and spears, but I ducked and side-stepped and avoided every blow. Out of the skalli door I leaped, and fled down the slope toward our galleys with the rest of Tostig’s

vikings, Tostig among them.

For we could plainly see four long, low galleys sweeping in from the sea and outnumbered as we were, we only wished to get aboard our galleys and flee to the sea. Not even Tostig cared to stay and fight against such odds. The galleys tried to hem us in the bay, but we made it out into the open sea. For several leagues they followed us, but finally turned and sailed back to Erling's bay.

All of Tostig's vikings were in an ugly humor, Tostig no less. For vikings were not used to running from enemies and there was fighting and fleeing and no loot. I smiled as I watched the vikings.

"No loot." said Holgar, angrily, "Not a trinket, not a coin."

"We might have had plunder by boat-fulls had not Tostig tried to seize the girl." Einar added.

That was the talk I was pleased to hear. I had hidden my hamper of loot under some furs. Now I lifted it and bore it to the middle of the deck. All the vikings watched me, perplexed.

"Here are some few trinkets." I said, "Had I obeyed Tostig's order and carried off the girl, we should not have this now."

I took from the hamper a golden-hilted dagger in a golden sheath and a handful of bracelets and rings.

"Divide the rest amongst yourselves." I said, with a wave of my hand toward the hamper.

"By Thor!" swore Lodbrog with amazement, "Such generosity I have not met with for long! Unless my eyes belie me, there is in that hamper a silver sword-sheath I would fain possess."

I watched them, a slight smile on my face, as with many a hearty oath, they divided the loot. Their respect and esteem for me was going forward by leaps and bounds, as I intended it should.

Then came old Rane, to announce that Tostig commanded me before him at once. I went forward to the quarter-deck, where Tostig was.

Tostig was in a fine rage, cursing all Jutes in general and Erling in particular.

He glared at me furiously, his hand playing with his sword-hilt.

“I ordered you to seize the girl and bear her away.” he said, furiously, “You disobeyed my command.”

“That I might bear away some of Erling’s plunder and men should not say the raid was for naught and that we fled empty-handed.”

“What care I?” he thundered, “Your place is to obey.” And he sent his fist with all his power against my face. I caught the blow on an up-flung arm but the force was enough to knock me from my feet and send me rolling along the deck.

From the vikings came a murmur of dissaproval.

Half-stunned, I got to my feet. I turned to the vikings.

“You see,” I said, “How Tostig deals with those who disobey his commands. By seizeing the loot for all of us, instead of the girl, I went against Tostig’s orders. Now ye know that Tostig must be obeyed.”

Thus I spoke craftily, and Tostig glared at me, not sure whether to smite me down or not. Then he could see, that though they said nothing, the vikings were clearly on my side. I believed I could have started a mutiny there and then but such was not my intention. Tostig’s eyes blazed and he stepped forward, his fingers closing around the hilt of his sword.

But before he could speak I skillfully turned aside whatever he might say, by seeming to acknowledge his supremacy.

“See that you obey Tostig’s commands in all things.” I said, still adressing the vikings, “I did wrong in not seizing the girl for Tostig. Knowing that we all would share in the loot, I took it. But Tostig is our chieftain and it is for him to say whether or not we shall take plunder. Why should I disobey Tostig and take loot for ourselves when he commands me to seize a woman for Tostig? With all submission to you, Tostig.” I added humbly and walked away, leaving Tostig glaring after me uncertainly, and the vikings with puzzled looks on their face. I smiled to myself. Oh, I was crafty, I, Hakon the Norseman.

Tostig and the vikings were puzzled. Craft meant little to them. All save one. I saw Sigurd watching me and a faint smile was on his lips. No word passed between us but glances of understanding.

The hamper of loot had been a large one and filled to the brim with much costly plunder. I had scarcely managed to carry it, and there was not a viking on the ship that did not recieve his share.

Unseen myself, I heard two of the vikings discussing the loot and myself.

“Tostig did wrong in smiting Hakon.” quoth Erik, “Had it not been for Hakon, we should have come away from Erling’s skalli empty-handed.”

“But if Hakon had carried off Erling’s daughter, as Tostig ordered,” argued Garulf, “we might have had all of Erling’s wealth as ransom.”

Erik laughed scornfully, “Think you Tostig would have given her up for ransom? Besides if Hakon had carried her off, Erling would have followed us with his five dragon-ships and slain us all. No, Hakon did as he should have done.”

“Doubtless you are right.” agreed Garulf.

Cunningly, without speaking against Tostig and giving him an excuse to slay me, craftily, without drawing suspicion of any sort to myself, I turned the vikings against Tostig, against his arrogance, his over-bearing ways, his cruelty. Many of them hated Tostig anyway, so it was not such a difficult matter. For Tostig was arrogant and selfish and cruel, ruling with a hand of iron.

Ragnar’s ship, that had become separated from Tostig’s ship in the flight from Erling’s bay, met us again.

The two ships swept along-side and the vikings shouted to each other.

“What loot have ye?” Holgar yelled sarcastically. The answer was a torrent of curses, directed mostly at Erling and his Jutes.

The men on Tostig’s ship waved their plunder and shouted taunts.

“You have no man like Hakon on your ship!” shouted Lodbrog, “He alone had the swiftness and wit to bring away any loot.”

Later when Ragnar came aboard the “Kraken” as Tostig’s dragon-ship was called, and was told, by Tostig with many curses, of my feat, the viking chief looked at me appraisingly. I was appraising him likewise. Ragnar was not so famed in battle as Tostig, yet he was close behind the chieftain in fame and he

was shrewder and more skilled in council. I decided I could use Ragnar.

“We will sail for Bretland.” said Tostig, “There should be much plunder along the coast.”

So for Bretland we sailed. Tostig scorned to hug the coast and we sailed straight out across the sea.

Not far off the coasts of Orkneyar, the Orkney islands, we sighted two dragon-ships. They tacked to meet us and soon we saw that they were Angles, the vikings of Gathlaff who was as fierce and cruel a chieftain as Tostig. There was little friendship between Norseman and Angle and and the vikings joined battle instantly. Straight for Gathlaff’s dragon-ship drove the “Kraken”, hurled through the water by long oars that bended in the rowers’ hands as they drove the ship forward, the vikings crowding the rails of all the ships, brandishing their weapons and yelling savage war-cries. Tostig stood in the bows of the “Kraken”, his long, yellow beard streaming down over his corselet, his voice booming battle-cries and curses, wild and gusty as the sea-winds, his great sword glittering in his hand.

The ships struck with a crash and in an instant were fastened together with swift-thrown grappling irons and the ship-rails were crowded with battling men, and was a din of clashing swords and bucklers as each crew sought to board the other ship. A swift glance cast over my shoulder showed the other Angle ship and Ragnar’s ship, grappled together in the same manner.

For awhile the struggle on the ships-rail was undecided and then, with a berserk shout, Tostig cleared a space with a terrific sweep of his sword and leaped over the rails onto the the deck of the Angle ship.

The Angles wavered for a moment and then gave back a few steps before a determined rush of the Norsemen and some score of us managed to clamber over the rail and join Tostig on the deck.

In an instant the whirlwind of battle shifted from the ships-rails to deck of the Angle’s ship.

The deck was a swirling sea of glittering swords and battling vikings. Tostig and Gathlaff were striving to come near each other and their men were seeking to aid them, but the battle-press was too great.

A man could scarce find room to swing a sword and spears had been discarded as useless. It was the kind of hand-to-hand fighting I liked best. I

was not so tall or so large as most of the men, and I fought crouching low, depending mostly upon stabbing and thrusting, my shield held above my head and shoulders. Most vikings preferred to stand erect and swing their long swords with all their power and with full reach, so such close fighting encumbered most of them.

A long sword crashed down upon my upraised shield, bearing me to the deck. The wielder of the sword was Gathlaff. I sprang from the deck, stabbing as I leaped, but my sword was turned aside by the Angle's shield and in turn I side-stepped his sword as it swished down.

Then I leaped in and my sword gashed Gathlaff's arm as he struck it aside. In another instant the battle had swirled away, separating the Angle and I. The battle raged fiercely on the quarter-deck.

I saw Sigurd's foot slip and he went down on the deck. An Angle sprang forward, sword lifted. With an over-hand stroke I struck the Angle down and dragged Sigurd to his feet with the other hand. The Angles pressed in on us and we fought back to back until a space was cleared.

Tostig and Gathlaff met in the prow of the dragon-ship. All about them the battling vikings drew away and left a space clear.

The two chieftains were well matched, both skilled and savage fighters, both blond giants.

Their swords whirled glittering in the air and clashed deafningly as they smote and warded.

Back and forth they swayed and battled, blow after blow they struck and warded with lightning swiftness.

Then Gathlaff's sword crashed down on Tostig's winged helmet. The Norseman staggered, reeled, and with one swift thrust drove his sword through Gathlaff's iron corselet.

Gathlaff flung his arms wide and pitched backward over the ship-rail. Tostig reeled and then tumbled to the deck, his sword falling from his hand.

For a moment both Norsemen and Angles stood, astounded at the fall of both chieftains.

Then I saw my chance. I leaped forward, waving my sword.

“Rally, vikings!” I shouted, in ringing tones, “Gathlaff has fallen! Sweep the decks! One effort and we have conquered!”

A berserk yell went up from the Norsemen. Yelling they surged forward and swept the Angles back and back until they were hemmed against the ship-rail. They fought like devils but the Norsemen hewed them down and hurled them over the rail until I sprang in and stopped them. I had to use my fists and the flat of my sword but Sigurd saw what I intended and aided me and presently the Norse vikings drew back reluctrantly and lowered their swords. Some twenty Angles stood at bay against the ship-rail, their swords red and notched, their armor rent and battered. But indomitable courage showed in their bearing. They showed no fear as they faced us.

Along with several other accomplishments not usually possessed by vikings, I could speak a number of languages besides my own. Angle was one of those languages and using that language I addressed the Angles.

“Throw down your arms.” I said, “It is useless to fight longer. You are surrounded by many times your number, Gathlaff, your chieftain, is slain. And see,” I continued, pointing to the other ships, “your other ship is taken.”

On its deck a few Angles, at bay against the main-mast, stood off Ragnar’s victorious Norsemen. I bade Sigurd hail Ragnar and stop the battle.

“If you will throw down your arms you shall be spared.” I went on, “I offer you the choice of entering our ships and becoming part of our company, on the same footing as the Norse vikings.”

Angles and Norsemen stared at me in astonishment. Such offers were not over common, then.

“We will never join with you, we will not go aboard your ships.” an Angle answered briefly, “Slay us if you will; at least we will go down fighting.”

The Norsemen moved restlessly, shifting their weapons. I motioned them back.

“Your long-boat has not been touched.” I said, “It should hold all of you. The dragon-ship will not float to land. Take the long-boat and go. The islands of Orkneyar are not far. You should be able to reach them safely.”

“You mean we are to go free?” asked an Angle, hesitatingly.

“Yes.”

They could scarcely comprehend the fact. Such things were uncommon on the North Sea.

The Norsemen muttered dissaproval.

“What child’s play is this?” grumbled old Rane.

“The act of a weakling!” shouted Wigstan, “What, will you let these Angles, our foes, depart in peace with their boats and their weapons! What say, ye, vikings?”

“Ye have heard my command.” I said, swinging about to face the grumbling Norsemen, my sword in my hand, “And here I stand to back my orders.” I looked full into the eyes of the Norsemen and they gave back, abashed. I noted Sigurd standing near, a mocking smile on his face as he watched the vikings, his hand resting on his sword-hilt.

There were some twenty Angles from the other dragon-ship, whom Ragnar realeased with their weapons at my word, though he raised his brows and then shrugged his shoulders.

The two long-boats from the Angle ships held the men easily and they embarked, setting their course for the shores of Orkneyar, which were just visible on the far horrizon.

Just before they pushed off, a tall, keen-eyed Angle who had done most of the speaking, addressed me, “What do men call you?” he asked.

“Hakon.” I answered.

“I am Oslaf of the White-sword.” he answered, “And I will remember.”

With those words, he swung down into one of the long-boats and took the tiller. The Angles bent to the oars and soon the two long-boats were speeding toward the distant Orkney islands, lifting to the waves.

Tostig, it turned out was not slain. Gathlaff’s sword descending on his bronze helmet, had merely knocked him unconcious. He came to, cursing savagely, and wishing to renew the battle.

He cursed more when he found that the battle was over.

“Were any prisoners taken?” he demanded.

“No.” replied Sigurd.

“They were all slain?”

“All but some twenty on each ship.” Wigstan said, “And those Hakon sent away with their boats and weapons.”

Tostig was furious. “You take much upon yourself, Hakon.” he thundered, “I am chieftain here.”

I gazed at him with a calculating eye. It was in my mind to draw sword and decide the chieftainship then and there but I decided it was not time. Too many men were still for Tostig.

We found much plunder in the Angle galleys. The Angles were fierce, far-ranging pirates and they had taken many ships and sacked many villages.

The loot we took from the two ships more than paid them for taking them, the Norsemen considered.

The Angles had fought bravely and skillfully and some twenty Norsemen had been slain.

But to fight, to slay and be slain was the Norsemen’s idea of life. They cared for no other.

We salvaged the two dragon-ships and having repaired them, manned them with men from the “Kraken” and from the “Cormorant”, Ragnar’s ship.

Later we sold them to the Juts at Brunanbuhr.

Endnotes

*1 Sea of Silent Waters = Pacific Ocean

*2 Neandertals

*3 Cro-Magnons

*4 Mediterranean Sea

*5 To avoid confusion I have used the modern terms for places and clans. – AUTHOR

Appendices

Robert E. Howard and the Picts: A Chronology

Circa 1918–1919

Howard discovers, in a ‘Canal Street library’ in New Orleans, a book in which he first learns about the Picts. (See excerpts from Letter to H.P. Lovecraft, ca. January 1932, and Alvin Earl Perry, *A Biographical Sketch of Robert E. Howard* [1935], below.)

Untitled essay, ca. 1920–1923

Howard wrote this report on the history of the Picts, possibly for school. An initial page or pages are clearly missing, and are presumed lost.

which has characterized them through all the ages. The cavemen that were left took refuge in deep forests and mountainous wilds from which they occasionly emerged to steal cattle, burn and murder and furnish the basis for tales of a later ages, telling of giants and ogres.

Later on the great Celtic race swept over Europe and the Picts in their turn fled to the forests and caves, furnishing the basis of fairy tales of gnomes, elves and other fairies.

But that was not until a much later date. The Picts scattered all over Europe. Some are still found in the mountains of the Pyrenees. But they made their longest stand in the British Isles and it is there that we are interested in them.

The Picts of Britain underwent several complete changes in appearance and manner. There is no greater difference between the first Picts and the Indian than there was between the first Picts and the Picts who opposed Hengest.

I have already described the Picts who first came to Britain. This type

remained unchanged for several hundred years. The people remained peaceful, gaining their food by agriculture and becoming more and more civilized and more skillful artizans.

Then came the great Celtic invasion and the laborious work and progress of half a thousand years was overturned and undone in an instant for that is a Celtic characteristic. The dawning Pictish generation was nipped in the bud.

The Picts could not stand before the race of warriors skilled in the work of metals and the make and usage of weapons, but vastly inferior to the Picts in artizanship.

So they fled to the northern mountains. Many descendants of the early cavemen lurked in the mountains and Pictish cunning concieved a plan of utilizing together the great strenth and brute courage of the aboriginals with the shrewdness of the Picts, to the discomfort of the Celtic invaders. So hunter and artizan banded themselves together against the warrior and the ancient enemies were united. So when the Celts grew tired of Britain and marched north, they met with so many unpleasant surprises, mostly in the shape of ambuscades and night attacks that they retreated back into Britain and it was not until the Brythonic invasion, years later, that the Celts ever gained a foothold in Scotland, though many went on into Ireland.

Living close together and fighting as one nation, naturally lessened the mutual contempt and hate and the Picts and aborigines began to intermarry.

For some reason or other the Picts as Silurian that fled to Wales did not unite with the cave-men's descendents and the early types of Picts remained unchanged, except as, later they were altered by intermarriage with the Celts, fleeing before other invaders. And to this day in mountains of western Wales are still to be found traces of the ancient Pictish type.

The first Celts to invade Britain were Gaels with brown hair, grey eyes and tall rather spare forms. They came from Gaul, especially Brittany, where the people today have much Celtic blood in them.

The next invaders were also Celts but differed from the Gaelic Celts in many ways.

They were tall, like the Gaels but with larger, heavier bodies. As a rule they had blue eyes and red or yellow hair. The came mainly from what is now Belgium and the Netherlands and were called Brythons from which the names Britain and Briton were derived. Possibly they had some Teutonic blood in

them. They overcame the Gaels as the Gaels overcame the Picts and the Gaels retreated into Wales and Scotland.

LETTER TO TEVIS CLYDE SMITH, 5 OCTOBER 1923

I'm writing a book which doubtless would make you tired and would sound like a lot of fool stuff to most folks, but as I am writing it for my own amusement, the opinion of other people about it don't interest me, as I know of.

The book takes in lots of territory and a lot of characters. Some of the characters are Ammon the Amalekite, who was a famous swordsman, Swift-Foot, the tree-man, Tostig the Mighty, a viking and something of a villian, Hakon, a Norseman and crafty as a fox, Bran Mak Morn, who was the greatest chief the Picts ever had, and many others too numerous to mention.

DECEMBER 1924

The Lost Race is returned to Howard by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright,

for revisions.

From *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, 1928

This is a thinly disguised autobiographical novel, based on Howard's life over the previous four years. 'Steve' is Steve Costigan, Howard's alter-ego; 'The Forgotten Race' is *The Lost Race*; 'Bizarre Stories' is *Weird Tales*.

A*s for 'The Forgotten Race,' he [the editor of 'Bizarre Stories'] had found several faults with it, in that it left too much to the imagination and left some important facts unexplained. Steve perceived that even the readers of other magazines were not supposed to have any intellect or imagination of their own. However, the editor professed himself ready to take the story if the changes and additions which he suggested were made....Yet he [Steve] somehow felt a sinking of the heart when he contemplated rewriting 'The Forgotten Race.' Once a story was completed, he was through with it, eager to start something else, and he wished to look on it again only in print. He doubted his ability to make the tale come up to standard, even with the editor's remarks to guide him, and, dreading a second refusal, delayed several days before he made the changes. He sent off two more stories with it when he returned it. These two came back, but* Bizarre Stories *accepted the revised story, offering $30.00, payable on publication.*

7 JANUARY 1925

The Lost Race is accepted by *Weird Tales*.

LETTER TO TEVIS CLYDE SMITH, 14 JANUARY 1926

In this letter Howard sketched out the two waves of Celtic migration into Britain. Referring to the first wave, the Gaels, he says: *From Ireland they spread to Britain, chasing the Picts into Scotland and Wales*. And: *Some of the Lowland Scotch, and Welsh and most of the Cornish are Brythonic, though the Cornish are mixed a lot with Pict and Gael.*

LETTER FROM FARNSWORTH WRIGHT TO ROBERT E. HOWARD, 16 MARCH 1926

Dear Mr. Howard:

I thoroughly enjoyed MEN OF THE SHADOWS, but I fear I can not use it in WEIRD TALES. It is too little of a "story," despite the vigorous action in the opening pages. It is rather a chronicle of a tribe, a picture of the evolution of a race; and thereby it lacks the suspense and thrill that a story of individual conflict and hopes and fears and drama would have.

I do not know of any magazine that would take a story like this, unless possibly FRONTIER. But if you send it to FRONTIER, I suggest that you first clarify the conflict between Bran Mak Morn and the wizard, on page 11, for the reader is left in the dark as to what happened, as to what Bran Mak Morn did to cause the wizard to give up.

JANUARY 1927

The Lost Race is published in *Weird Tales.*

CIRCA 1928

Howard writes *The Little People*.

LETTER TO HAROLD PREECE, 20 OCTOBER 1928

About Atlantis – I believe something of the sort existed, though I do not especially hold any theory about a high type of civilization existing there – in fact, I doubt that. But some continent was submerged away back, or some large body of land, for practically all peoples have legends about a flood. And the Cro-Magnons appeared suddenly in Europe, developed to a high state of

primitive culture; there is no trace to show that they came up the ladder of utter barbarism in Europe. Suddenly their remains are found supplanting the Neanderthal Man, to whom they have no ties of kinship whatever. Where did they originate? Nowhere in the known world, evidently. They must have originated and developed through the different basic stages of evolution in some land which is not now known to us.

The occultists say that we are the fifth – I believe – great sub-race. Two unknown and unnamed races came, then the Lemurians, then the Atlanteans, then we. They say the Atlanteans were highly developed. I doubt it. I think they were simply the ancestors of the Cro-Magnon man, who by some chance, escaped the fate which overtook the rest of the tribes.

All my views on the matter I included in a long letter to the editor to whom I sold a tale entitled The Shadow Kingdom*, which expect will be published as a foreword to that story – if ever. This tale I wove about a mythical antediluvian empire, a contemporary of Atlantis.*

1928–1929

Howard writes most of his stories of Kull, king of the antediluvian land of Valusia (of which *The Shadow Kingdom* was the first) during this period. Most of the stories feature Kull's Pictish friend Brule, and other Pictish characters.

1929

Howard writes a long narrative poem, *The Ballad of King Geraint*, featuring among its many characters Dulborn, a Pict.

CIRCA MARCH 1930

The Dark Man is accepted for *Strange Stories* (planned companion magazine to *Weird Tales*).

Kings of the Night accepted for *Weird Tales* (submitted to *Strange Stories* but Wright accepted for *Weird Tales*).

LETTER TO HAROLD PREECE, 4 JANUARY 1930

The Welsh who broke the armies of William Rufus were powerfully built men, deep-chested and strong, but short in height. Admixture with the Silurian natives, doubtless of Iberian blood, or a strong Roman strain may have been

responsible for this loss of height, as well as the change in complexion.

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF, 1930

In this story, rejected by *Argosy* in a letter dated June 3, 1930, Cormac Mac Art, a 5th century Irish reiver, is witness to a confrontation between Norsemen who have built a steading on an island in the Shetlands, and a Pictish chief, Brulla, whom they beat and throw out of their hall when he orders them to leave the islands. In the climactic battle, Picts from all over the Shetlands attack the Norse settlement. In one scene, Cormac sees them stealing through the forest:

Something took shape in the shadows. A long line of figures moved like ghosts just under the shadows of the trees; a shiver passed along Cormac's spine. Surely these creatures were elves, evil demons of the forest. Short and mightily built, half stooping, one behind the other, they passed in almost utter silence. In the shadows their silence and their crouching positions made them monstrous travesties on men. Racial memories, half lost in the misty gulfs of conciousness, came stealing back to claw with icy fingers at Cormac's heart. He did not fear them as a man fears a human foe; it was the horror of world-old, ancestral memories that gripped him – dim felt, chaotic dream-recollections of darker Ages and grimmer days when primitive men battled for supremacy in a new world.

For these Picts were a remnant of a lost tribe – the survivals of an elder epoch – last out-posts of a dark Stone Age empire that crumbled before the bronze swords of the first Celts. Now these survivors, thrust out on the naked edges of the world they had once ruled, battled grimly for their existence.

LETTER FROM H.P. LOVECRAFT TO ROBERT E. HOWARD, 20 JULY 1930

It's true that the Celts share most vigourously the myth-cycle of fairies, gnomes, & little people, *which anthropologists find all over western Europe (in a distinctive form marking it off from the general Aryan personification system which produces fauns, satyrs, dryads, etc.) & attribute to vague memories of contact with the Mongoloids was wholly prior to their invasion of Britain. Since these fair Nordic Celts found a smaller, darker race in Britain & Ireland, there is a tendency on the part of some to be misled, & to assume that the "little people" legends allude to contact with* those *dark aborigines. This, however, can clearly be disproved by analysis of the myths; for such myths invariably share with the parallel Continental myths the specific features (or tracks of these features) of having the "little people" essentially* repulsive *&* monstrous, *subterraneous in their habits of dwelling,*

& given to a queer kind of hissing discourse. Now this kind of thing does to apply to Mediterraneans – who are not abnormal or repulsive from the Nordic standpoint, (being very similar in features) who did not live underground, & whose language (possibly of a lost branch, but conceivably proto-Hamitic, Hamitic or even Semitic) could scarcely have suggested hissing. The inevitable probability is that all the Nordics met with this old Mongoloid stock at a very early date, when it shared the continent with the northward-spreading Mediterraneans & with the remnants of other Paleolithic & Neolithic races now lost to history; & that after the ensuing conquest the defeated Mongoloids took to deep woods & caves, & survived for a long time as malignantly vindictive foes of their huge blond conquerors – carrying on a guerrilla harassing & sinking so low in the anthropological scale that they became bywords of dread & repulsion. The memory of these beings could not but be very strong among the Nordics, (as well as among such Mediterraneans & Alpines as may have encountered them) so that a fixed body of legend was produced – to be carried about wherever Celtic or Teutonic tribes might wander.

LETTER TO H.P. LOVECRAFT, CIRCA AUGUST 1930

Your observations regarding the Mongoloid aborigines and their relation to the fairy tales of western Europe especially interested me. I had supposed, without inquiring very deeply into the matter, that these legends were based on contact with the earlier Mediterraneans, and indeed, wrote a story on that assumption which appeared some years ago in Weird Tales – "The Lost Race." I readily see the truth of your remarks that a Mongoloid race must have been responsible for the myths of the Little People, and sincerely thank you for the information.

LETTER TO H.P. LOVECRAFT, CIRCA SEPTEMBER 1930

Thank you very much for the kind things you said about the "Bran-cult." I notice the current Weird Tales announces my "Kings of the Night" for next month's issue. I hope you like the story. Bran is one of the "Kings." I intend to take your advice about writing a series of tales dealing with Bran.

LETTER TO TEVIS CLYDE SMITH, CIRCA SEPTEMBER 1930

Weird Tales announces for next month's issue my story, "Kings of the Night" – ($120.00). Some ways this story is the best I ever wrote. Nothing very weird about it, but good battle stuff, if I do say so myself.

CIRCA OCTOBER 1930

The Children of the Night is accepted for *Weird Tales.*

LETTER TO H.P. LOVECRAFT, CIRCA OCTOBER 1930

By the way, I recently sold Weird Tales a short story, "The Children of the Night" in which I deal with Mongoloid-aborigine legendry, touch cryptically on the Bran-cult, and hint darkly and vaguely of nameless things connected with Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, Tsathoggua and the Necronomicon; as well as quoting lines from Flecker's "Gates of Damascus" and lending them a cryptic meaning which I'm sure would have surprised the poet remarkably!

LETTER TO HAROLD PREECE, OCTOBER–NOVEMBER 1930

Have you read my latest story in Weird Tales? I believe you'll like it; it deals with Rome's efforts to subjugate the wild people of Caledonia. The characters and action are ficticious but the period and the general trend of events are historical. The Romans, as you know, never succeeded in extending her boundaries very far into the heather and after several unsuccessful campaigns, retreated south of the great wall. Their defeat must have been accomplished by some such united effort as I have here portrayed – a temporary alliance between Gaelic, Cymric, aboriginal and possibly Teutonic elements. I have a pretty definite idea that a slow filtration of Germanic settlers had begun in eastern Caledonia long before the general overflow that swamped the Latinized countries.

Some day I'm going to try to write a novel length tale dealing with that misty age: allowing myself the latitude that a historical novelist is supposed to be allowed, I intend to take a plot something like this: dealing with the slow crumbling of Roman influence in Britain, and the encroachment of Teutonic wanderers from the East. These, landing on the eastern coast of Caledonia, press slowly westward, until they come in violent conflict with the older Gaelic settlements on the west. Across the ruins of the ancient pre-Aryan Pictish kingdom, long pinned between implacable foes, these war-like tribes come to death-grips, only to turn on a common foe, the conquering Saxons. I intend the tale shall be of nations and kings rather than individuals. Doubtless I shall never write it.

As regards the pre-Aryan communities I mentioned in "The Voice of El-lil", as you know all western Europe was once inhabited by small, dark, garlic eating tribes of Neolithic culture, known variously as Mediterraneans, Iberians, Basques, Long-heads, Garlic-eaters, and in Britain, Silures or Picts. Traces of these people, conquered and subjugated by the Aryan Celts, show still in the races today in the British Isles, and these primitive peoples I

mentioned are undoubtedly vestiges of the race – whence doubtless come the legends of Phoenician settlements in Cornwall and Ireland. New races of Nordic Celts or Teutons coming into the Isles, seeing these small dark men concluded that they were of Semitic blood, or Egyptians. The fact is, they preceded all other races into the west, possibly excepting a very primitive Mongoloid proto-type which was soon extinct.

This Mediterranean type underlies all races and only a few centuries is required for this people to change the physiognomy of their conquerors. Who, for instance, not knowing their real origin, would realize that the first Aryan ancestors of the Italian, the Greek, the Persian and the high-caste Hindu were light eyed blonds, almost identical with the present day Scandinavian?

B*ut to return to the Mediterraneans of the Isles, where these tribes remained a race apart longer than anywhere else. These aborigines are popularly known as Picts, and by this name I have designated them in all my stories – and I have written a number in which I mentioned or referred to them – "The Lost Race", "The Shadow Kingdom," "The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune", "The Dark Man", "Kings of the Night", to say nothing of several which I have not marketed.*

Doubtless this term is in strictest sense, incorrect. I doubt very much if those ancient folk had any term that designated them as a people; Tuatha Feda, roughly, forest people, was the name given them by the Gaels of Ireland.

Bede says the Picts came to Scotland from Scythia after the Gaels had arrived in Ireland. The Gaels drove them into Scotland, rather, would not let them settle in Ireland, and later came over and dissposessed them. It is readily seen that these people were not aborigines, since the Gaels came into Ireland as late as the first century A.D.

But here arises a question: did these "Scythic" people take the name of an older race among which they settled, or did they lend those older peoples their name?

It is no doubt but that the "Picts of Galloway" were of a very mixed race, with Celtic no doubt predominating. But when I speak of the Picts proper, I am referring to the older, pure-blooded pre-Aryan type.

I think the following theory to be fairly logical: that Caledonia was inhabited from earliest times by a dark Mediterranean people; that the conquest of the Romans drove numbers of Cymric Britons into the heather, whence, no doubt, comes the tales of the "Caledonians", large, fair haired people who fought

with war-chariots. No doubt these tribes mixed a great deal with the natives.

Then, in the press of Roman conquest, which no doubt caused displacements of many Celtic tribes, doubtless including the Gaels, who must have come into Ireland from the mountains of Spain or Southern Gaul, another wave of Celts came into Caledonia, that race known as Picts. They may have been of Gaelic, Belgic or Brythonic type, though all evidence points to a non-Gaelic language. Or they may have been a type of Celt unclassified. Very likely it was already a mixed race, with Latin, Teutonic or even Semitic elements. This race, settling in Caledonia, possibly conquered the natives and gave its name to them.

You understand I have little or no foundation for this theory and am merely putting it forth as a supposition.

The natives of Galloway were spoken of as "The Picts of Galloway" long after the coming of the Saxons. Doubtless a strong strain of Mediterranean blood coursed in their veins, but they were a very mixed breed – besides the Pictish blood mentioned, they had strong elements of Gaelic, Brythonic, Danish and Saxon. More especially as Galloway, as the name implies (Gael-Gall, meaning a province under the control of the Gall, or foreigners) was early conquered by the Angle kings and did not regain its independence for a long time. The name Pict came to mean merely a native of Galloway. But behind that local term loomed a great shadowy realm reaching back into the Stone Age. Therefore, the term Pict as I use it, refers to that old, old Neolithic race in its purity and completeness.

According to Scotch legends, which speak of the Picts with the utmost horror and aversion, the Pictish kingdom was destroyed and its subjects wiped out by Kenith McAlpine. Doubtless the kingdom was destroyed but it is likely that the people were absorbed by the surrounding Gaelic tribes. And this kingdom was the mixed one of which I have already spoken. The old pure Mediterranean type had largely disapproved. The old pure Mediterranan type had largely disappeared. Distance lends perspective but it also distorts and foreshortens. Doubtless the legends of the Picts became mixed with the older, darker legends of the ancient Mongoloids of the Continent. These tales form the basis of the Aryan folk lore – as regards dwarfs, elves, gnomes, kobolds, demons, and the like – and twining themselves about the myths of the Picts, lent them a supernatural accent – demoniac appearance, sub-human stature, and so on. No doubt the later Picts were of more stocky build and unprepossessing appearance than the purer blooded Gaels, but I cannot believe that they were as hideous in aspect as the legends make them out.

NOVEMBER 1930

Kings of the Night is published in *Weird Tales*.

29 OCTOBER 1931

People of the Dark is returned by *Strange Tales* for rewrite. The Picts are only glancingly mentioned in this story, but the ‘little people’ or ‘children of the night’ are featured prominently.

DECEMBER 1931

The Dark Man is published in *Weird Tales*.

CIRCA JANUARY 1932

The People of the Dark is sold to *Strange Tales*.

SELECTIONS FROM *THE HYBORIAN AGE,* EARLY 1932

In this essay Howard outlined his imaginary history of the worlds of Kull and Conan, linking them, ultimately, with historical peoples. The Picts feature prominently throughout the essay, as one of the oldest races in the world, rarely rising above a state of barbarism.

Of that epoch known by the Nemedian chroniclers as the Pre-Cataclysmic Age, little is known except the latter part, and that is veiled in the mists of legendry....

The barbarians of that age were the Picts, who lived on islands far out on the western ocean; the Atlanteans, who dwelt on a small continent between the Pictish Islands and the main, or Thurian Continent; and the Lemurians, who inhabited a chain of large islands in the eastern hemisphere....

The Thurian civilization was crumbling; their armies were composed largely of barbarian mercenaries. Picts, Atlanteans, and Lemurians were their generals, their statesmen, often their kings....

Then the Cataclysm rocked the world. Atlantis and Lemuria sank, and the Pictish Islands were heaved up to form the mountain peaks of a new continent....

The barbarians fared a little better than the civilized races. The inhabitants of the Pictish Islands were destroyed, but a great colony of them, settled among

the mountains of Valusia's southern frontier, to serve as a buffer against foreign invasion, was untouched. The Continental kingdom of the Atlanteans likewise escaped the common ruin, and to it came thousands of their tribesmen in ships from the sinking land. Many Lemurians escaped to the eastern coast of the Thurian Continent, which was comparatively untouched....

To the continental kingdom of the Atlanteans, from sunken areas, swarmed myriads of beasts and savages – ape-men and apes. Forced to battle continually for their lives, they yet managed to retain vestiges of their former state of highly-advanced barbarism. Robbed of metals and ores, they became workers in stone like their distant ancestors, and had attained a real artistic level, when their struggling culture came into contact with the powerful Pictish nation. The Picts had also reverted to flint, but had advanced more rapidly in the matter of population and war-science. They had none of the Atlanteans' artistic nature; they were a ruder, more practical, more prolific race. They left no pictures painted or carved on ivory, as did their enemies, but they left remarkably efficient flint weapons in plenty.

These stone age kingdoms clashed, and in a series of bloody wars, the outnumbered Atlanteans were hurled back into a state of savagery, and the evolution of the Picts was halted. Five hundred years after the Cataclysm the barbaric kingdoms have vanished. It is now a nation of savages – the Picts – carrying on continual warfare with tribes of savages – the Atlanteans. The Picts had the advantage of numbers and unity, whereas the Atlanteans had fallen into loosely-knit clans. That was the west of that day. ...

After the Pictish-Atlantean wars had destroyed the beginnings of what might have been a new culture, another, lesser cataclysm further altered the appearance of the original continent ... and the attendant earthquakes, floods and volcanoes completed the ruin of the barbarians which their tribal wars had begun.

A thousand years after the lesser cataclysm, the western world is seen to be a wild country of jungles and lakes and torrential rivers. Among the forest-covered hills of the northwest exist wandering bands of ape-men, without human speech, or the knowledge of fire or the use of implements. They are the descendants of the Atlanteans, sunk back into the squalling chaos of jungle-bestiality from which ages ago their ancestors so laboriously crawled. To the southwest dwell scattered clans of degraded, cave-dwelling savages, whose speech is of the most primitive form, yet who still retain the name of Picts, which has come to mean merely a term designating men – themselves, to

distinguish them from the true beasts with which they contend for life and food. It is their only link with their former stage. Neither the squalid Picts nor the apish Atlanteans have any contact with other tribes or peoples....

Look at the world five hundred years later.... To the west the apish Atlanteans are beginning the long climb upward. They have completed the cycle of existence; they have long forgotten their former existence as men; unaware of any other former state, they are starting the climb unhelped and unhindered by human memories. To the south of them the Picts remain savages, apparently defying the laws of Nature by neither progressing nor retrogressing....

The tale of the next thousand years is the tale of the rise of the Hyborians, whose warlike tribes dominate the western world. Rude kingdoms are taking shape. The tawny-haired invaders have encountered the Picts, driving them into the barren lands of the west. To the northwest, the descendants of the Atlanteans, climbing unaided from apedom into primitive savagery, have not yet met the conquerors....

Five hundred years later the kingdoms of the world are clearly defined.... North of Aquilonia, the westernmost Hyborian kingdom, are the Cimmerians, ferocious savages, untamed by the invaders, but advancing rapidly because of contact with them; they are the descendants of the Atlanteans, now progressing more steadily than their old enemies the Picts, who dwell in the wilderness west of Aquilonia....

But the barbarians have kept their bloodstream pure... The Picts are of the same type as they always were – short, very dark, with black eyes and hair....

Five hundred years later the Hyborian civilization was swept away ... it was in the west that a power was growing destined to throw down the kings of Aquilonia from their high places....

But the Picts were growing amazingly in population and power. By a strange twist of fate, it was largely due to the efforts of one man, and he an alien, that they set their feet upon the ways that led to eventual empire. This man was Arus, a Nemedian priest, a natural-born reformer. What turned his mind toward the Picts is not certain, but this much is history – he determined to go into the western wilderness and modify the rude ways of the heathen by the introduction of the gentle worship of Mitra. He was not daunted by the grisly tales of what had happened to traders and explorers before him, and by some whim of fate he came among the people he sought, alone and unarmed, and was not instantly speared.

The Picts had benefitted by contact with Hyborian civilization, but they had always fiercely resisted that contact. That is to say, they had learned to work crudely in copper and tin, which was found scantily in their country, and for which latter metal they raided into the mountains of Zingara, or traded hides, whale's teeth, walrus tusks and such few things as savages have to trade. They no longer lived in caves and tree-shelters, but built tents of hides, and crude huts, copied from those of the Bossonians. They still lived mainly by the chase, since their wilds swarmed with game of all sorts, and the rivers and sea with fish, but they had learned how to plant grain, which they did sketchily, preferring to steal it from their neighbors the Bossonians and Zingarans. They dwelt in clans which were generally at feud with each other, and their simple customs were blood-thirsty and utterly inexplicable to a civilized man, such as Arus of Nemedia. They had no direct contact with the Hyborians, since the Bossonians acted as a buffer between them. But Arus maintained that they were capable of progress, and events proved the truth of his assertion – though scarcely in the way he meant.

Arus was fortunate in being thrown in with a chief of more than usual intelligence – Gorm by name. Gorm can not be explained, any more than Genghis Khan, Othman, Attila, or any of those individuals, who, born in naked lands among untutored barbarians, yet possess the instinct for conquest and empire-building. In a sort of bastard-Bossonian, the priest made the chief understand his purpose, and though extremely puzzled, Gorm gave him permission to remain among his tribe unbutchered – a case unique in the history of the race. Having learned the language Arus set himself to work to eliminate the more unpleasant phases of Pictish life – such as human sacrifice, blood-feud, and the burning alive of captives. He harangued Gorm at length, whom he found to be an interested, if unresponsive listener. Imagination reconstructs the scene – the black-haired chief, in his tiger-skins and necklace of human teeth, squatting on the dirt floor of the wattle hut, listening intently to the eloquence of the priest, who probably sat on a carven, skin-covered block of mahogany provided in his honor – clad in the silken robes of a Nemedian priest, gesturing with his slender white hands as he expounded the eternal rights and justices which were the truths of Mitra. Doubtless he pointed with repugnance at the rows of skulls which adorned the walls of the hut and urged Gorm to forgive his enemies instead of putting their bleached remnants to such use. Arus was the highest product of an innately artistic race, refined by centuries of civilization; Gorm had behind him an heritage of a hundred thousand years of screaming savagery – the pad of the tiger was in his stealthy step, the grip of the gorilla in his black-nailed hands, the fire that burns in a leopard's eyes burned in his.

Arus was a practical man. He appealed to the savage's sense of material gain; he pointed out the power and splendor of the Hyborian kingdoms, as an example of the power of Mitra, whose teachings and works had lifted them up to their high places. And he spoke of cities, and fertile plains, marble walls and iron chariots, jeweled towers, and horsemen in their glittering armor riding to battle. And Gorm, with the unerring instinct of the barbarian, passed over his words regarding gods and their teachings, and fixed on the material powers thus vividly described. There in that mud-floored wattle hut, with the silk-robed priest on the mahogany block, and the dark-skinned chief crouching in his tiger-hides, was laid the foundations of empire.

As has been said, Arus was a practical man. He dwelt among the Picts and found much that an intelligent man could do to aid humanity, even when that humanity was cloaked in tiger-skins and wore necklaces of human teeth. Like all priests of Mitra, he was instructed in many things. He found that there were vast deposits of iron ore in the Pictish hills, and he taught the natives to mine, smelt and work it into implements – agricultural implements, as he fondly believed. He instituted other reforms, but these were the most important things he did: he instilled in Gorm a desire to see the civilized lands of the world; he taught the Picts how to work in iron; and he established contact between them and the civilized world. At the chief's request he conducted him and some of his warriors through the Bossonian marches, where the honest villagers stared in amazement, into the glittering outer world.

Arus no doubt thought that he was making converts right and left, because the Picts listened to him, and refrained from smiting him with their copper axes. But the Pict was little calculated to seriously regard teachings which bade him forgive his enemy and abandon the warpath for the ways of honest drudgery. It has been said that he lacked artistic sense; his whole nature led to war and slaughter. When the priest talked of the glories of the civilized nations, his dark-skinned listeners were intent, not on the ideals of his religion, but on the loot which he unconsciously described in the narration of rich cities and shining lands. When he told how Mitra aided certain kings to overcome their enemies, they paid scant heed to the miracles of Mitra, but they hung on the description of battle-lines, mounted knights, and maneuvers of archers and spearmen. They harkened with keen dark eyes and inscrutable countenances, and they went their ways without comment, and heeded with flattering intentness his instructions as to the working of iron, and kindred arts.

Before his coming they had filched steel weapons and armor from the

Bossonians and Zingarans, or had hammered out their own crude arms from copper and bronze. Now a new world opened to them, and the clang of sledges re-echoed throughout the land. And Gorm, by virtue of this new craft, began to assert his dominance over other clans, partly by war, partly by craft and diplomacy, in which latter art he excelled all other barbarians.

Picts now came and went freely into Aquilonia, under safe-conduct, and they returned with more information as to armor-forging and sword-making. More, they entered Aquilonia's mercenary armies, to the unspeakable disgust of the sturdy Bossonians. Aquilonia's kings toyed with the idea of playing the Picts against the Cimmerians, and possibly thus destroying both menaces, but they were too busy with their policies of agression in the south and east to pay much heed to the vaguely-known lands of the west, from which more and more stocky warriors swarmed to take service among the mercenaries.

These warriors, their service completed, went back to their wilderness with good ideas of civilized warfare, and that contempt for civilization which arises from familiarity with it. Drums began to beat in the hills, gathering-fires smoked on the heights, and savage sword-makers hammered their steel on a thousand anvils. By intrigues and forays too numerous and devious to enumerate, Gorm became chief of chiefs, the nearest approach to a king the Picts had had in thousands of years. He had waited long; he was past middle age. But now he moved against the frontiers, not in trade, but in war.

Arus saw his mistake too late; he had not touched the soul of the pagan, in which lurked the hard fierceness of all the ages. His persuasive eloquence had not caused a ripple in the Pictish conscience. Gorm wore a corselet of silvered mail now, instead of the tiger-skin, but underneath he was unchanged – the everlasting barbarian, unmoved by theology or philosophy, his instincts fixed unerringly on rapine and plunder.

The Picts burst on the Bossonian frontiers with fire and sword, not clad in tiger-skins and brandishing copper axes as of yore, but in scale-mail, wielding weapons of keen steel. As for Arus, he was brained by a drunken Pict, while making a last effort to undo the work he had unwittingly done. Gorm was not without gratitude; he caused the skull of the slayer to be set on the top of the priest's cairn. And it is one of the grim ironies of the universe that the stones which covered Arus' body should have been adorned with that last touch of barbarity – above a man to whom violence and blood-vengeance were revolting.

But the newer weapons and mail were not enough to break the lines. For

years the superior armaments and sturdy courage of the Bossonians held the invaders at bay, aided, when necessary, by imperial Aquilonian troops. During this time the Hyrkanians came and went, and Zamora was added to the empire.

Then treachery from an unexpected source broke the Bossonian lines....

And then the Pictish invasion burst in full power along those borders. It was no mere raid, but the concerted rush of a whole nation, led by chiefs who had served in Aquilonian armies, and planned and directed by Gorm – an old man now, but with the fire of his fierce ambition undimmed. This time there were no strong walled villages in their path, manned by sturdy archers, to hold back the rush until the imperial troops could be brought up. The remnants of the Bossonians were swept out of existence, and the blood-mad barbarians swarmed into Aquilonia, looting and burning, before the legions, warring again with the Nemedians, could be marched into the west.... The Picts surged irresistibly eastward, and host after host was trampled beneath their feet. Without their Bossonian archers the Aquilonians found themselves unable to cope with the terrible arrow-fire of the barbarians. From all parts of the empire legions were recalled to resist the onrush, while from the wilderness horde after horde swarmed forth, in apparently inexhaustible supply. And in the midst of this chaos, the Cimmerians swept down from their hills, completing the ruin. They looted cities, devastated the country, and retired into the hills with their plunder, but the Picts occupied the land they had over-run. And the Aquilonian empire went down in fire and blood....

Nemedia, unconquerable by Hyborians, reeled between the riders of the east, and the swordsmen of the west, when a tribe of Æsir, wandering down from their snowy lands, came into the kingdom, and were engaged as mercenaries; they proved such able warriors that they not only beat off the Hyrkanians, but halted the eastward advance of the Picts.

The world at that time presents some such picture: a vast Pictish empire, wild, rude and barbaric, stretches from the coasts of Vanaheim in the north to the southern-most shores of Zingara. It stretches east to include all Aquilonia except Gunderland, the northern-most province, which, as a separate kingdom in the hills, survived the fall of the empire, and still maintains its independence. The Pictish empire also includes Argos, Ophir, the western part of Koth, and the western-most lands of Shem. Opposed to this barbaric empire is the empire of the Hyrkanians....

Gorm was slain by Hialmar, a chief of the Nemedian Æsir. He was a very old

man, nearly a hundred years old. In the seventy-five years which had elapsed since he first heard the tale of empires from the lips of Arus – a long time in the life of a man, but a brief space in the tale of nations – he had welded an empire from straying savage clans, he had overthrown a civilization. He who had been born in a mud-walled, wattle-roofed hut, in his old age sat on golden thrones, and gnawed joints of beef presented to him on golden dishes by naked slave-girls who were the daughters of kings. Conquest and the acquiring of wealth altered not the Pict; out of the ruins of the crushed civilization no new culture arose phoenix-like. The dark hands which shattered the artistic glories of the conquered never tried to copy them. Though he sat among the glittering ruins of shattered palaces and clad his hard body in the silks of vanquished kings, the Pict remained the eternal barbarian, ferocious, elemental, interested only in the naked primal principles of life, unchanging, unerring in his instincts which were all for war and plunder, and in which arts and the cultured progress of humanity had no place....

For a short age Pict and Hyrkanian snarled at each other over the ruins of the world they had conquered. Then began the glacier ages, and the great Nordic drift... All over the western world, the Picts and Hyrkanians were staggering before this younger, fiercer people....

The western world was now dominated by Nordic barbarians. The Picts still held Aquilonia and part of Zingara, and the western coast of the continent....

There was no such thing, at that time, as a consolidated Nordic empire. As always, the tribes had each its own chief or king, and they fought savagely among themselves. What their destiny might have been will not be known, because another terrific convulsion of the earth, carving out the lands as they are known to moderns, hurled all into chaos again....

In the west the remnants of the Picts, reduced by the cataclysm once more to the status of stone age savages, began, with the incredible virility of their race, once more to possess the land, until, at a later age, they were overthrown by the westward drift of the Cimmerians and Nordics. This was so long after the breaking-up of the continent that only meaningless legends told of former empires.

CIRCA JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1932

Worms of the Earth is accepted by *Weird Tales.*

LETTER TO H.P. LOVECRAFT, CIRCA JANUARY 1932

Referring again to your sense of placement with Rome – which is a subject so interesting to me I can hardly keep off it – your explanation is logical and without doubt correct. My sense of placement among the various western barbarians can doubtless be explained as logically. But there is one hobby of mine which puzzles me to this day. I am not attempting to lend it any esoteric or mysterious significance, but the fact remains that I can neither explain nor understand it. That is my interest in the people which, for the sake of brevity, I have always designated as Picts. I am of course aware that my use of the term might be questioned. The people who are known in history as Picts, are named variously as Celts, aborigines or even Germans. Some authorities maintain they came into Britain after the Britons, and just before the coming of the Gaels. The "wild Picts of Galloway" which figure largely in early Scottish history and legendry, were doubtless of a very mixed race – probably predominantly Celtic, both Cymric and Gaelic, and speaking a sort of bastard Cymric, adulterated with elements of Gaelic and aborigine, of which latter strain there must have been quite a percentage in the blood of the Picts. There might have been considerable Germanic or Scandinavian mixture, as well. Probably the term "Pict" was properly applied only to the wandering Celtic tribe which settled in Galloway and presumably conquered and was absorbed by the aboriginal population. But to me "Pict" must always refer to the small dark Mediterranean aborigines of Britain. This is not strange, since when I first read of these aborigines, they were referred to as Picts. But what is strange, is my unflagging interest in them. I read of them first in Scottish histories – merely bare mentionings, usually in disapproval. Understand, my historical readings in my childhood were scattered and sketchy, owing to the fact that I lived in the country where such books were scarce. I was an enthusiast of Scottish history, such as I could obtain, feeling a kinship with the kilted clansmen because of the Scottish strain in my own blood. In the brief and condensed histories I read, the Picts were given only bare mention, as when they clashed with, and were defeated by, the Scotch. Or in English history, as the cause of the Britons inviting in the Saxons. The fullest description of this race that I read at that time, was a brief remark by an English historian that the Picts were brutish savages, living in mud huts. The only hint I obtained about them from a legendary point of view, was in a description of Rob Roy, which, mentioning the abnormal length of his arms, compared him in this respect to the Picts, commenting briefly upon their stocky and ape-like appearance. You can see that everything I read at that time, was not calculated to inspire an admiration for the race.

Then when I was about twelve I spent a short time in New Orleans and found in a Canal Street library, a book detailing the pageant of British history, from prehistoric times up to – I believe – the Norman conquest. It was written for

school-boys and told in an interesting and romantic style, probably with many historical inaccuracies. But there I first learned of the small dark people which first settled Britain, and they were referred to as Picts. I had always felt a strange interest in the term and the people, and now I felt a driving absorption regarding them. The writer painted the aborigines in no more admirable light than had other historians whose works I had read. His Picts were made to be sly, furtive, unwarlike, and altogether inferior to the races which followed – which was doubtless true. And yet I felt a strong sympathy for this people, and then and there adopted them as a medium of connection with ancient times. I made them a strong, warlike race of barbarians, gave them an honorable history of past glories, and created for them a great king – one Bran Mak Morn. I must admit my imagination was rather weak when it came to naming this character, who seemed to leap full grown into my mind. Many kings in the Pictish chronicles have Gaelic names, yet in order to be consistent with my fictionized version of the Pictish race, their great king should have a name more in keeping with their non-Aryan antiquity. But I named him Bran, for another favorite historical character of mine – the Gaul Brennus, who sacked Rome. The Mak Morn comes from the famous Irish hero, Gol Mac Morn. I changed the spelling of the Mac, to give it a non-Gaelic appearance, since the Gaelic alphabet contains no "k", "c" being always given the "k" sound. So while Bran Mac Morn is Gaelic for "The Raven, Son of Morn", Bran Mak Morn has no Gaelic significance, but has a meaning of its own, purely Pictish and ancient, with roots in the dim mazes of antiquity; the similarity in sound to the Gaelic term is simply a coincidence!

But what I intended to say was, I am not yet able to understand my own preference for these so-called Picts. Bran Mak Morn has not changed in the years; he is exactly as he leaped full-grown into my mind – a pantherish man of medium height with inscrutable black eyes, black hair and dark skin. This was not my own type; I was blond and rather above medium size than below. Most of my friends were of the same mold. Pronounced brunet types such as this were mainly represented by Mexicans and Indians, whom I disliked. Yet, in reading of the Picts, I mentally took their side against the invading Celts and Teutons, whom I knew to be my type and indeed, my ancestors. My interest, especially in my early boyhood, in these strange Neolithic people was so keen, that I was not content with my Nordic appearance, and had I grown into the sort of a man, which in childhood I wished to become, I would have been short, stocky, with thick, gnarled limbs, beady black eyes, a low retreating forehead, heavy jaw, and straight, coarse black hair – my conception of a typical Pict. I cannot trace this whim to an admiration for some person of that type – it was a growth from my interest in the Mediterranean race which first settled Britain. Books dealing on Scottish

history were easier for me to obtain than those dealing with Irish history, so in my childhood I knew infinitely more about Scottish history and legendry than Irish. I had a distinct Scottish patriotism, and liked nothing better than reading about the Scotch and English wars. I enacted those wars in my games and galloped full tilt through the mesquite on a bare-backed racing mare, hewing right and left with a Mexican machete and slicing off cactus pears which I pretended were the heads of English knights. But in reading of clashes between the Scotch and the Picts, I always felt my sympathies shift strangely. But enough of this; it isn't my intention to bore you.

LETTER TO H.P. LOVECRAFT, CIRCA MARCH 2, 1932

As to my feelings toward the mythical Picts, no doubt you are right in comparing it to the Eastern boy's Indian-complex, and your own feelings toward Arabic things. My interest in the Picts was always mixed with a bit of fantasy – that is, I never felt the realistic placement with them that I did with the Irish and Highland Scotch. Not that it was the less vivid; but when I came to write of them, it was still through alien eyes – thus in my first Bran Mak Morn story – which was rightfully rejected – I told the story through the person of a Gothic mercenary in the Roman army; in a long narrative rhyme which I never completed, and in which I first put Bran on paper, I told it through a Roman centurion on the Wall; in "The Lost Race" the central figure was a Briton; and in "Kings of the Night" it was a Gaelic prince. Only in my last Bran story, "The Worms of the Earth" which Mr. Wright accepted, did I look through Pictish eyes, and speak with a Pictish tongue!

In that story, by the way, I took up anew, Bran's eternal struggle with Rome. I can hardly think of him in any other connection. Sometimes I think Bran is merely the symbol of my own antagonism toward the empire, an antagonism not nearly so easy to understand as my favoritism for the Picts. Perhaps this is another explanation for the latter: I saw the name "Picts" first on maps, and always the name lay outside the far-flung bounds of the Roman empire. This fact aroused my intense interest – it was so significant of itself. The mere fact suggested terrific wars – savage attacks and ferocious resistance – valor and heroism and ferocity. I was an instinctive enemy of Rome; what more natural than that I should instinctively ally myself with her enemies, more especially as these enemies had successfully resisted all attempts at subjugation. When in my dreams – not day-dreams, but actual dreams – I fought the armored legions of Rome, and reeled back gashed and defeated, there sprang into my mind – like an invasion from another, unborn world of the future – the picture of a map, spanned by the wide empire of Rome, and ever beyond the frontier, outside the lines of subjugation, the cryptic legend,

“Picts and Scots”. And always the thought rose in my mind to lend me new strength – among the Picts I could find refuge, safe from my foes, where I could lick my wounds and renew my strength for the wars.

LETTER FROM FARNSWORTH WRIGHT TO ROBERT E. HOWARD, 10 MARCH 1932

In this letter, Wright says, *I want to schedule WORMS OF THE EARTH soon, for that is an unusually fine story, I think.* Also in this letter, he rejects *The Frost-Giant’s Daughter* and returns *The Phoenix on the Sword* for revisions; these are the first two Conan stories submitted by Howard to *Weird Tales*.

MARCHERS OF VALHALLA, CIRCA APRIL 1932

This is Howard’s first story of James Allison, who remembers past incarnations, generally as a barbaric warrior in an epoch before the dawn of history. It tells of the world-spanning migration of a band of pre-Aryan Nordics, a band which includes one man not of the tribe.

We came of many clans, but all of the golden-haired AEsir, except the man who strode beside me. He was Kelka, my blood brother, and a Pict. He had joined us among the jungle-clad hills of a far land that marked the eastern-most drift of his race, where the tom-toms of his people pulsed incessantly through the hot star-flecked night. He was short, thick-limbed, deadly as a jungle-cat. We of the AEsir were barbarians, but Kelka was a savage. Behind him lay the abysmal chaos of the squalling black jungle. The pad of the tiger was in his stealthy tread, the grip of the gorilla in his black-nailed hands; the fire that burns in a leopard’s eyes burned in his.

JUNE 1932

People of the Dark is published in *Strange Tales*.

NOVEMBER 1932

Worms of the Earth is published in *Weird Tales*.

LETTER TO H.P. LOVECRAFT, CIRCA DECEMBER 1932

Concerning “Worms of the Earth” – I must have been unusually careless when I wrote that, considering the errors – such as “her” for “his”, “him” for “himself”, “loathsome” for “loathing”, etc.. I’m at a loss to say why I spelled Eboracum as Ebbracum. I must investigate the matter. I know I saw it spelled that way, somewhere; it’s not likely I would make such a mistake

entirely of my own volition, though I do frequently make errors. Somehow, in my mind, I have a vague idea that it's connected some way with the Gaelic "Ebroch" – York.

THE VALLEY OF THE WORM, FEBRUARY 1934

This is another story of James Allison, remembering a past incarnation as a hero whose battle with a monstrous creature inspired later legends of dragon-slayers. In this story, the AEsir come into a land inhabited by the Picts.

I will take up the tale at a time when we came into jungle-clad hills reeking with rot and teeming with spawning life, where the tom-toms of a savage people pulsed incessantly through the hot breathless night. These people came forth to dispute our way – short, strongly built men, black-haired, painted, ferocious, but indisputably white men. We knew their breed of old. They were Picts, and of all alien races the fiercest. We had met their kind before in thick forests, and in upland valleys beside mountain lakes. But many moons had passed since those meetings.

I believe this particular tribe represented the easternmost drift of the race. They were the most primitive and ferocious of any I ever met. Already they were exhibiting hints of characteristics I have noted among black savages in jungle countries, though they had dwelt in these environs only a few generations. The abysmal jungle was engulfing them, was obliterating their pristine characteristics and shaping them in its own horrific mold. They were drifting into head-hunting, and cannibalism was but a step which I believe they must have taken before they became extinct. These things are natural adjuncts to the jungle; the Picts did not learn them from the black people, for then there were no blacks among those hills. In later years they came up from the south, and the Picts first enslaved and then were absorbed by them.

CIRCA OCTOBER 1934

Beyond the Black River is accepted by *Weird Tales*. This story prominently features the Hyborian Age Picts. Two other Conan stories, the unfinished *Wolves Beyond the Border*, possibly written before *Beyond the Black River*, and an unsold story, *The Black Stranger*, which was likely written afterward, also feature the Picts.

ALVIN EARL PERRY, *A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ROBERT E. HOWARD,* FANTASY MAGAZINE, JULY 1935

As to his fictional characters, we'll let Mr. Howard speak for himself. He

says: "The first character I ever created was Francis Xavier Gordon, El Borak, the hero of 'The Daughter of Erlik Khan' (Top-Notch)*, etc. I don't remember his genesis. He came to life in my mind when I was about ten years old. The next was Bran Mak Morn, the Pictish king ('The Kings of the Night,' etc.,* Weird Tales*). He was the result of my discovery of the existence of the Pictish race, when reading some historical works in a public library in New Orleans at the age of thirteen. Physically he bore a striking resemblance to El Borak."*

Robert E. Howard, Bran Mak Morn and the Picts

Rusty Burke and Patrice Louinet

"There is one hobby of mine which puzzles me to this day," wrote Robert E. Howard to H.P. Lovecraft in 1932. "That is my interest in the people which, for the sake of brevity, I have always designated as Picts. I am of course aware that my use of the term might be questioned.... But to me 'Pict' must always refer to the small dark Mediterranean aborigines of Britain. This is not strange, since when I first read of these aborigines, they were referred to as Picts. But what is strange, is my unflagging interest in them."

The Picts are the only fictional creations to appear throughout Howard's writing career. Only one other creation, Francis X. Gordon ('El Borak') appears at both the beginning and the end of Howard's career, but he was notably absent from the early 1920s until 1934. Picts, on the other hand, appear in no fewer than thirty stories, poems, and fragments, from *The West Tower* (probably written circa 1922–1923), a Steve Allison fragment, to *The Black Stranger*, one of the last Conan stories, probably written in 1935, and rarely a year passes that they do not appear in some story. It seems likely that, had he lived longer, the Picts would have surfaced again in his work.

The Picts appear in many different contexts. In the second story Howard sold professionally, *The Lost Race*, they are living underground, apparently somewhere in the south of Britain, having been driven there by Celtic invaders. In the Bran Mak Morn tales, they are the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Scotland, fighting back the invading forces of Roman Britain. In the stories of Turlogh O'Brien and Cormac Mac Art, they are the last surviving remnants of Bran's people, now pitted against the Norsemen who have established themselves in the remote northern islands off the coast of Scotland. In the Kull series, they

are barbaric allies of the Valusian king, while in the Hyborian Age of Conan, they are the savage inhabitants of a wilderness that stretches from the western borders of Aquilonia to the sea. In the James Allison stories, they are a bestial, jungle-dwelling race. Always they are at the outer fringes of the world.

Howard told an interviewer, “The first character I ever created was Francis Xavier Gordon, El Borak.... He came to life in my mind when I was about ten years old. The next was Bran Mak Morn, the Pictish king.... He was the result of my discovery of the existence of the Pictish race, when reading some historical works in a public library in New Orleans at the age of thirteen.”

Somewhat earlier, Howard had told H.P. Lovecraft that he had first read of the Picts in histories of Scotland, of which he was an enthusiast, but that these had been “bare mentionings, usually in disapproval.”

“Then when I was about twelve I spent a short time in New Orleans and found in a Canal Street library, a book detailing the pageant of British history, from prehistoric times up to – I believe – the Norman conquest. It was written for school-boys and told in an interesting and romantic style, probably with many historical inaccuracies. But there I first learned of the small dark people which first settled Britain, and they were referred to as Picts. I had always felt a strange interest in the term and the people, and now I felt a driving absorption regarding them. The writer painted the aborigines in no more admirable light than had other historians whose works I had read. His Picts were made to be sly, furtive, unwarlike, and altogether inferior to the races which followed – which was doubtless true. And yet I felt a strong sympathy for this people, and then and there adopted them as a medium of connection with ancient times. I made them a strong, warlike race of barbarians, gave them an honorable history of past glories, and created for them a great king – one Bran Mak Morn.”

While, in the absence of a definite statement from Howard, we cannot know with real certainty which book it was in which he found the Picts, methodical research has finally yielded a very strong candidate: *The Romance of Early British Life: From the Earliest Times to the Coming of the Danes*, by G.F. Scott Elliot (London: Seeley and Co. Ltd., 1909). The book fits so many of the particulars in Howard’s description, and in it we find so many descriptions and incidents which find resonance in Howard’s work, that one almost feels it has to be the book in question, especially in the absence of any other candidates. In discussing the spread of Neolithic culture from the region of the Caucasus and Mesopotamia, across Northern Africa, and into Spain, for

instance, Scott Elliot writes: “This was the first race of man to be thoroughly domesticated. Like the sheep, goats, and oxen which they brought with them, they had been themselves tamed, trained, and taught to labour. Their descendants still exist all along the Mediterranean, and not only there but in our own islands. This people, or rather this race of mankind, has been called by many different names. The most sonorous is not doubt ‘Homo Mediterraneus,’ but they have also been called Basques, Iberians, Silurians, the Firbolg, the Dolmen-builders, the Picts, and Eaters of Garlic. We shall call them Picts, because this is the shortest name, and by using it we shall save time, labour, ink, and paper in writing about them.”

These Mediterraneans are the people whom Scott Elliot says migrated to Britain in Neolithic times, and slowly wrested the islands from the previous inhabitants, a race of red-haired cave dwellers. Interestingly, he fabricates a little story about a party of Picts from Brittany preparing to paddle across the English Channel in dugout canoes loaded with their possessions and livestock. “A strong force of the oldest men in the settlement, well armed and watchful, were ‘seeing off’ the party of emigrants. These were all young men, mostly of a disagreeably bold and enterprising disposition, and of young women who were inclined to be insubordinate and disrespectful to the heads of the tribe. So they were selected as being the best to depart, not merely for their own good, but for the future peace of the old settlement.”

Compare this with the story told to Cororuc by the ancient Pict in *The Lost Race*:

“Our people came from the south. Over the islands, over the Inland Sea. Over the snow-topped mountains, where some remained, to stay any enemies who might follow. Down into the fertile plains we came. Over all the land we spread. We became wealthy and prosperous. Then two kings arose in the land, and he who conquered, drove out the conquered. So many of us made boats and set sail for the far-off cliffs that gleamed white in the sunlight. We found a race of red-haired barbarians, who dwelt in caves.”

One of the most powerfully suggestive correspondences between *The Romance of Early British Lif*e and Howard’s Pictish stories is in the chapter Scott Elliot titles “My General, Agricola.” In it, he tells the story of a Tungrian serving in the Roman legion in Britain, and relates their troubles in Caledonia.

“We [the 2nd Cohort of Tungrians] would go in front and choose the road for the legion. Then a few of us would go first, and watch carefully for an

ambush. Often there would be a sudden storm of stone-headed arrows upon us; a Caledonian might be lurking behind every tree or any boulder, and they are clever at concealing themselves. A soldier of ours was cooking his dinner beside a small pool, and had been there two hours watching the banks of it. Then he turned his back, and a savage came out of the water below where he stood and pierced him with his spear before he could turn round. They can stay for hours together with only the lips and nose above water, and no one can see them if the water is dark or full of reeds."

Compare this with the story told by the Norse narrator of *Men of the Shadows*, particularly the incident in which Romans are killed on the shore of a lake (p. 8).

Scott Elliot's outline of Pictish history is generally in accord with the scholarship of the day, differing from the mainstream only in using the term "Picts" to designate these Mediterranean invaders of ancient Britain. Most authorities seem to have preferred the term "Iberians," but for the most part, they agreed that this short, dark people had spread across most of Western Europe from North Africa (though it was not known if they had originated there), eventually migrating into the British Isles, and were the bringers of Neolithic culture. They were thought to be related (though none could say precisely how) to the Basques, and some speculated that they were kin to the Silures (ancient Welsh), Picts (ancient Scots), Lapps, Finns, and other remnants of pre-Celtic peoples. Because they were thought to have originated in northern Africa, and were physiologically similar, they were thought by some to have been related to the Berbers.

Of Howard's first attempts to write about the Picts, we know little. In his January 1932 letter to Lovecraft, he mentioned "a long narrative rhyme which I never completed, and in which I first put Bran on paper," saying he had "told it through a Roman centurion on the Wall." A listing of Howard's poems made by his agent, Otis Adelbert Kline, after his death, included one titled *Bran Mak Morn*, with the notation that it was ten pages long. Unfortunately, this poem has not surfaced and may be forever lost. In a letter dated October 5, 1923, Howard told his friend Clyde Smith of a book he was writing "for my own amusement" which featured, among others, "Bran Mak Morn, who was the greatest chief the Picts ever had...." This work, too, has not surfaced. Possibly Howard did not get far with it. [Note: *The story has been found. See page 289.*]

The earliest work featuring Bran or the Picts that we do have is *Bran Mak Morn*, three handwritten pages on composition paper, probably dating from

Howard's high school days (circa 1922–23). It is set during a time when the Picts are warring against both Gaelic and Norse invaders, but Bran apparently sees a greater foe looming: "A hard, thank-less task it is to raise the Pict nation out of savagery and bring it back to the civilization of our fathers. Of the Age of Brennus. The Picts are savages. I must make them civilized.... Because I know that no barbarian nation can stand before Rome."

Here is our earliest glimpse of a theme that will run throughout Howard's dealings with the Picts: they are a once-great, civilized race, fallen into barbarism or savagery. This theme, of course, finds echoes in much of Howard's other work, as well.

Another work that apparently dates from 1922–23, also hand-written, consists of four pages outlining the history of the Picts and Celts in Britain, essentially following the story as found in *The Romance of Early British Life*. Of some interest is his account of the immediate aftermath of the Celtic invasion. After relating that most of the Picts had fled to the mountains in the north (what are now the Scottish highlands), he notes that one group, who came to be called Silurians, had fled instead into Wales. The former group, he said, had eventually begun intermarrying with the red-haired savages who had preceded them; the latter were a different story.

"For some reason or other the Picts as Silurian that fled to Wales did not unite with the cave-men's descendents and the early types of Picts remained unchanged, except as, later they were altered by intermarriage with the Celts, fleeing before other invaders. And to this day in mountains of western Wales are still to be found traces of the ancient Pictish type."

It is these "Picts as Silurian" who figure in Howard's first (so far as we know) completed story of these people.

In the fall of 1924, Howard got his first literary break, when he sold *Spear and Fang*, a story about cavemen, to *Weird Tales*. The eighteen-year-old had been submitting stories to professional magazines for about three years, and this was his first sale. He hastened to follow up. According to his fictionalized autobiographical novel, *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, "There lingered in the back of his mind a desire to glorify the neolithic man – a hangover from some imagined romance of his early childhood. So he followed up [*Spear and Fang*] with a wild tale of early Britain, [*The Lost Race*]." The story was returned to him by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright: "As for [*The Lost Race*], he had found several faults with it, in that it left too much to the imagination and left some important facts unexplained.... However, the editor

professed himself ready to take the story if the changes and additions which he suggested were made." (*Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, p. 35; Howard had used the thinly disguised titles, *Talon and Bow* and *The Forgotten Race*).

Though he "felt a sinking of the heart when he contemplated rewriting [*The Lost Race*]," Howard did make the changes sought by Wright, and the tale became his second sold to, and fourth published in, the magazine, appearing in the January 1927 issue.

The Lost Race, like *Spear and Fang*, is a relatively straightforward adventure story with little of the truly "weird" in it. A Briton named Cororuc is travelling from Cornwall to his home somewhere to the east, when he is captured by a band of very small, dark-complexioned men, armed with stone tools and dressed in furs. They take him to an immense cavern where he is brought before their apparent leader, an incredibly ancient man, from whom he learns that these people are Picts. He is incredulous: "Picts!... I have fought Picts in Caledonia...; they are short but massive and misshapen; not at all like you!" "They are not true Picts," the ancient tells him, and relates to him the story of "the lost race," which we have already quoted above.

Cororuc is bewildered by the ancient's evident hatred of him, and of all the Celts: "That these people were even human, he was not at all certain. He had heard so much of them as 'little people.' Tales of their doings, their hatred of the race of man, and their maliciousness flocked back to him. Little he knew that he was gazing on one of the mysteries of the ages. That the tales which the ancient Gaels told of the Picts, already warped, would become even more warped from age to age, to result in tales of elves, dwarfs, trolls and fairies... just as the Neanderthal monsters resulted in tales of goblins and ogres."

There is little in this story of the Picts that we do not find in Scott Elliot's book (save, of course, Howard's passionate intensity). As for the stories Cororuc had heard, already becoming "warped," we find in Scott Elliot: "A great many stories of giants are probably dim and jumbled-up traditions of the tall, red-haired cave-men seen by the first Picts who invaded Britain.... But at a much later period the conquering Pict is himself overcome by the Gaelic Celt. Then it is his turn to become a malignant gnome, a dark little dwarf, whose stone arrows are much to be dreaded.... It is by no means improbable that the 'little people' – that is, the small, dark Picts – did live on for many years in those underground houses of theirs...." This idea was not original with Scott Elliot, of course. Numerous writers of the time expressed the idea that fairy tales and myths must have some basis in historical fact.

The Lost Race was accepted by *Weird Tales* in January 1925 (it was not published until two years later). It is just over a year later that we find evidence of the next story of the Picts, when *Weird Tales* editor Wright rejects *Men of the Shadows*, saying: "I thoroughly enjoyed MEN OF THE SHADOWS, but I fear I can not use it in WEIRD TALES. It is too little of a 'story,' despite the vigorous action in the opening pages. It is rather a chronicle of a tribe, a picture of the evolution of a race; and thereby it lacks the suspense and thrill that a story of individual conflict and hopes and fears and drama would have."

This is, so far as we now know, the first completed story featuring Bran Mak Morn and, while Wright's comment that "it is too little of a 'story'" seems just, it is a seminal work for our understanding of Robert E. Howard's conceptions of the Picts, with it's lengthy "history" of the race, as told by an aged wizard. It is here that we find new elements grafted onto the story of the "Mediterranean" race.

"Men of the Shadows" is narrated by a yellow-haired Norseman who has served with the Roman legions manning Hadrian's wall. We have already noted that *The Romance of Early British Life* also told the story of a Roman legionary serving in Caledonia, and that the incident by the lake, in which our narrator's final two companions are speared by a Pict who has submerged himself, very clearly echoes a similar incident in Scott Elliot's book.

The narrator is captured by the Picts, but they are stayed from killing him by the command of their leader, before whom he is brought after he has recovered. When this chief refers to the Picts as "my people," the Norseman remonstrates, "But you are no Pict!" "I am a Mediterranean," the chief replies.

"Who are you?"

"Bran Mak Morn."

"What!" I had expected a monstrosity, a hideous, deformed giant, a ferocious dwarf built in keeping with the rest of his race.

"You are not as these."

"I am as the race was," he replied. "The line of chiefs has kept its blood pure through the ages, scouring the world for women of the Old Race."

Bran, then, is a “pure” Pict, while the rest of the race has degenerated. (The ancient in *The Lost Race* had said the Picts of Caledonia were “not true Picts.”) We will recall that, in both Scott Elliot and *The Lost Race*, it was suggested that the Picts, pushed by the Celts into the wild hills of the west and north to which they had themselves pushed the earlier, red-haired cavemen, had interbred with their savage predecessors “and became a race of monstrous dwarfs.” Because the line of chiefs “has kept its blood pure,” though, Bran represents the race as it once was. We can only wonder what his relationship to the Silurian Picts might be, for Howard does not make it explicit.

The Norseman is then witness to a confrontation between Bran and an aged wizard, what appears to be a contest of wills, a “combat between the eyes and the souls behind them.” When Bran has triumphed, the ancient relates to his listeners the history of his race, and we find some remarkable new elements now grafted onto the story of the Picts. We learn that they were a “Nameless Tribe” in the beginning, and had their origin somewhere in the northwest of the continent we now know as North America. They were the “First Race” of men, though “beast men” (Neanderthals) preceded them. The “Second Race” were Lemurians, the “Third Race” Atlanteans (also identified as Crô-Magnons), and the “Fourth Race” Celts. The beast-men (who may be identical with the “reindeer men,” red-haired savages) first fled southward before the Nameless Tribe, then crossed over to Africa via a chain of marshy islands, then northward into Europe. The Picts (or Nameless Tribe) first drifted from their original home to islands southeast of there, then fled eastward when a cataclysm destroyed their islands (now mountain peaks), then migrated into South America during the Ice Age, and then moved on to Atlantis (driving the Atlantean Crô-Magnons into Europe, where they displaced the Neanderthal beast-men). Following an internecine conflict, a portion of the Nameless Tribe migrated to Africa, and from this point their story follows the historical one.

These new elements appear to be derived from several sources. The “First Race” and successors come from Theosophy, a quasi-religious movement founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky in the 19th century. Her work was a hopeless gallimaufry of quasi-Oriental religion and philosophy combined with imperfectly understood science (or, more frequently, her rantings against science) and anthropology, not to mention flights of pure unbridled fancy, but she attracted a huge following. It is possible that Howard learned of Madame Blavatsky’s theories of the “root races” and “sub-races” of mankind through friends acquainted with occult literature, or through secondary sources. It

would not appear that he had read Blavatsky's own work, for he does not follow her identifications of the races in most particulars (certainly not her ludicrous physical descriptions), nor does he seem to allude in a direct way to any of her ideas.

Another source for these ideas appears to have been the work of the British folklorist Lewis Spence, particularly his *The Problem of Atlantis* (1924) and *Atlantis in America* (1925). In these works Spence brings together a great mass of geological, botanical, anthropological, and other evidence, together with accounts from Classical sources, in an attempt to prove the former existence of an Atlantean continent in the Atlantic Ocean. Spence, having written a number of scholarly treatises on the folklore of many cultures, was able to make it all sound convincing enough, at least to readers with no particular scientific knowledge, or those who wanted to be convinced (as, apparently, he did himself). His books have a much greater aura of plausibility than those of the occultists.

Spence's argument, in brief, hinged upon the "sudden" appearance of the Crô-Magnons in southwestern Europe, and the assumption that, since no evidence of an earlier, transitional stage was known, they must have acquired their culture somewhere other than Europe or Africa. He attempts to tie together a great mass of anthropological data to show a common culture-complex spreading through Africa, Europe, and the Americas at roughly the same time, suggesting that this culture must have originated at some mid-point between those lands, a place no longer accessible to archaeologists – Atlantis. This identification of Atlantis as the source of Crô-Magnon man and his culture seems to have been original with Spence, and as we have seen, Howard identifies the Atlanteans as Crô-Magnons. *Atlantis in America* goes into greater detail on the American evidences for his thesis, and includes a chapter, "The Analogy of Lemuria," which presents a brief outline of evidences adduced by other writers for the previous existence of a Pacific continent. Howard must have encountered these ideas between the writing of *The Lost Race* (accepted in January 1925) and *Men of the Shadows* (rejected March 1926).

Late in July 1925, Howard began a story called *The Isle of the Eons*. He appears to have written the first 26 pages of the story, which are fairly straightforward action, in that month, then set the tale aside for a time. He then resumed writing the story at about the same time he wrote *Men of the Shadows*, i.e., early 1926. He took up the tale where he had left it, and wrote an additional 17 pages, bringing the total to 43 pages, leaving the story, once again, unfinished. He would return to this draft once more, in 1927 or 1928,

and then write two other drafts in 1929.

The 1926 portion of the first draft ends as the unnamed “Dutchman” of the story deciphers some hieroglyphics, concluding that the isle on which he and his companion have been stranded is a remnant of Lemuria: “Lemuria iss to der Pacific, vot Atlantis iss to der Atlantic.... Von Kaelmann alvays said ... dot dey had a great civilization vhen der der men on Atlantis ver still apes, who ver der ancestors uf der Cro-Magnon peoples” (from unpublished draft, p. 43).

It seems possible, perhaps even likely, that Howard stopped working on *The Isle of the Eons* to write *Men of the Shadows*, a story in which he would refine and develop these new ideas.

We may also note that the 1926 section of *The Isle of the Eons* provided new information about the buildings and ruins found on the island, including a number of allusions and comparisons to Central and South American monuments or cities. While Spence posited that the pre-Columbian cultures of South and Central America owed much to Lemuria, Howard’s source for the new material in *The Isle of the Eon*s seems to have been not Spence, but E.A. Allen’s *The Prehistoric World: or, Vanished Races*, published in 1885, a copy of which was in Howard’s library.

In this book Howard not only found names and descriptions he could use in *The Isle of the Eons*, but also found several chapters that no doubt commanded his attention, in view of his interest in the Picts. Chapter 6, for example, is devoted to “The Neolithic Age in Europe,” and particularly to the “Turanians.” The word “Pict” does not appear in the book, but we can read that “history, tradition, linguistics, and ethnology conspire to fortify the conclusions that, in prehistoric times, all Europe was overspread by the Mongoloid (Turanian) race, of which remnants have survived to our own times in the persons of the Basques, Finns, Esths, Lapps, and some smaller tribes.” As to their physical description, it conforms to that of the writers we have already mentioned: “a race of people, small in stature, dark visaged, and oval-faced – fond of war and the chase, yet having a rude system of agriculture.”

Allen’s book, of course, makes no mention of a possible Atlantean or Lemurian connection for the Picts, and his Turanians are not described as the “First Race,” coming from America. Howard, though, did not hesitate to use some of Allen’s conclusions to his own ends. For instance, Allen devotes his tenth chapter to the mysterious “Mound Builders” of America, and offers the

following commentary concerning a mysterious effigy-mound:

“In this case, however, nearly all observers conclude that it was a religious work. Mr. MacLean, after describing these three figures, propounds this query: ‘Does the frog represent the creative, the egg the passive, and the serpent the destructive power of nature?’ Not a few writers, though not acquainted with the presence of the frog-shaped figure, have been struck with the combination of the egg and the serpent, that plays such an important part in the mythology of the Old World. We are told that the serpent, separate or in combination with the circle, egg, or globe, has been a predominant symbol among many primitive nations.”

Howard draws upon this in *Men of the Shadows*, thus reinforcing his mythical connection between America, Atlantis and the Picts:

“The ancient took a flaming brand from the fire and with a motion incredibly swift, inscribed the circle and triangle in the air. And strangely, the mystic symbol seemed to hover in the air, for a moment, a ring of fire.

“‘The circle without beginning,’ droned the wizard. ‘The circle unending. The Snake with its tail in its mouth, that encompasses the Universe. And the Mystic Three. Beginning, passivity, ending. Creation, preservation, destruction. Destruction, preservation, creation. The Frog, the Egg, and the Serpent. The Serpent, the Egg, and the Frog.’”

In depicting the contest of wills between Bran and the wizard, Howard seems to suggest more than a personal struggle for power between two men. Rather, the two are the focal points through which unseen powers seek to loose themselves upon the world. “The wizard was the Stone Age typified; the chief, the coming civilization. The destiny of the Pictish race, perhaps, hinged on that struggle.” The wizard warns Bran that if he wins “the Serpent coils again”: the serpent, as usual with Howard, is associated with the enemy, with destruction. Bran, on the contrary, is associated with the “coming civilization.”

It is interesting to note that in *Men of the Shadows*, and in the earlier playlet, *Bran Mak Morn*, Bran is referred as a chief. It is not until later in 1926, and the stories of Kull, that the theme of kingship, which we can see as, precisely, a step toward "coming civilization," is first dealt with. It will be almost exactly four years before we see Bran Mak Morn again, this time as a king. It is in the Kull stories that we next find the Picts.

The Picts of the Kull series are barbarian allies of the ancient kingdom of Valusia. In the first published Kull story, *The Shadow Kingdom*, which Howard worked at sporadically between the summer of 1926 and September 1927, we learn that Kull, as an Atlantean, is a "hereditary enemy of all Picts," though as king of Valusia he is their most important ally. He and a Pictish warrior, Brule, though their first meeting was marked by "mutual tribal enmity seething beneath their cloak of formality," come to be fast friends in this series, and on more than one occasion it is Brule who saves Kull's life. The Kull stories are set in the far recesses of an imaginative past, long before the great cataclysms that supposedly destroyed Atlantis and Lemuria, so the "historical" Picts of the early tales were now adopted by Howard as a means of connection, not just with "ancient times," but with the world of fantastic adventures through which Kull, and later Conan, would move. Howard completed 10 stories of Kull (including two in which he is merely an offstage character), a poem, and began three stories which he left unfinished, most written between 1927 and early 1929. Of these, only three stories (the first, *Exile of Atlantis*, and the two in which Kull is offstage) and the poem do not include Brule the Spear-Slayer and the Picts.

Some time in 1928, Howard wrote a story entitled *The Little People* in which the Picts are featured, with inspiration from yet another writer added into the mix. In this story, set in the modern day, a brother and sister, Americans named Costigan, are in England during a European tour. When his young sister expresses disgust for the "foolishness" of Arthur Machen's *The Shining Pyramid*, which he considers a "masterpiece of outré litrature," Costigan lectures her, telling the story of the Picts essentially as outlined in *The Romance of Early British Life*. But the reference to Machen's *The Shining Pyramid* suggests that Howard has now taken the Welsh writer's conception of *The Little People* and added it to his conception of the Picts.

In *The Shining Pyramid*, two Englishmen investigate the puzzling disappearance of a young woman from a local village, and ultimately are horrified witnesses when she is burned to death in a sacrificial ceremony by a host of loathsome underground dwellers, "things made in the form of men but stunted like children hideously deformed, the faces with the almond eyes

burning with evil and unspeakable lusts." Their flesh is described as a "ghastly yellow," and they speak to one another in "tones of horrible sibilance." In explaining to his friend Vaughan the chain of deductions that led them to that horrible scene, Dyson explains: "I remembered what people had said about Annie Trevor's disappearance, that she had been 'taken by the fairies'.... And the hint came of the old name of fairies, 'the little people,' and the very probable belief that they represent a tradition of the prehistoric Turanian inhabitants of the country, who were cave dwellers: and then I realised with a shock that I was looking for a being under four feet in height, accustomed to live in darkness, possessing stone instruments, and familiar with the Mongolian cast of features!"

Howard's linkage of the Picts with the *Little People* suggests that the once-proud Pictish race eventually devolved into misshapen underground monsters. This conception would undergo another change very soon.

In the spring of 1930, Howard returned for the first time in four years to Bran Mak Morn, selling two stories to *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright, *Kings of the Night* and *The Dark Man*. In the former, Bran has brought together forces of Gaels and Norsemen to join his Picts in what he hopes will be a decisive battle against the Romans. But the Norse leader has died, and his men refuse to follow either Bran or Cormac the Gael, insisting upon "a king, neither Pict, Gael nor Briton" to lead them. Through the sorcery of the aged wizard Gonar, King Kull of Valusia appears upon the scene, and takes on the leadership of the Norsemen. In *The Dark Man*, Howard's Irish outlaw, Turlogh O'Brien, learns that Bran Mak Morn has become a God to the remnants of the Pictish nation he forged. A brief synopsis of a Bran Mak Morn story has also been found among Howard's papers which seems to date from this time: it may in fact have been written before either of the completed stories, and represent a clear transition in Howard's thinking about Bran, for in this synopsis, which deals largely with the intriguing of Roman commanders to seize power for themselves in the period following the assassination of Carausius (Howard states: "The time is between 296 A.D. and 300 A.D."), Bran is first identified as "chief of the Cruithni Picts, but then as "the Pictish king." In both *Kings of the Night* and *The Dark Man*, Bran is referred to as "king" of the Picts, whereas in *Bran Mak Morn* and *Men of the Shadows*, he was a "chieftain." In *Kings*, it is made explicit that Bran rose "by his own efforts from the negligent position of the son of a Wolf clan chief, had to an extent united the tribes of the heather and now claimed kingship over all Caledon." The battle recounted in this tale is said to be "the first pitched battle between the Picts under their king and the Romans," thus comes early in Bran's career.

In this story Howard clearly links his imaginary pre-Cataclysmic world of Kull to our own historical world. The wizard, Gonar, tells Bran that he is a descendant of Brule the Spear-slayer, and tells how only the Picts survived the cataclysm that claimed Valusia, Atlantis, and Lemuria, that they won up the ladder again to civilization before being overrun by the Celts and again "hurled into savagery." "Here in Caledon," he says, "is the last stand of a once mighty race. And we change. Our people have mixed with the savages of an elder age which we drove into the North when we came into the Isles, and now, save for their chieftains, such as thou, Bran, a Pict is strange and abhorrent to look upon."

The Dark Man, set some eight centuries after *Kings of the Night*, makes clear that Bran's initial triumph, while it forged the Picts into a united nation and enabled them for a time to keep the Romans south of the Wall, was ultimately in vain. "Bran Mak Morn fell in battle; the nation fell apart. Like wolves we Picts live now among the scattered islands, among the crags of the highlands and the dim hills of Galloway. We are a fading people. We pass."

Some observers have noted the strong correspondences between Howard's poem, *The Song of a Mad Minstrel*, and Rudyard Kipling's *A Pict Song*, from his book *Puck of Pook's Hill*, and suggested that Kipling's tale, in that book, of the British Roman Parnesius and his struggle to hold the Wall of Hadrian against the Picts and Northmen during the reign of Maximus may have been an influence on Howard's Bran Mak Morn tales. It is a tempting hypothesis, with some strong circumstantial evidence. For instance, Howard's poem, with lines like "I am the thorn in the foot, I am the blur in the sight; I am the worm at the root, I am the thief in the night," clearly echoes Kipling's "We are the worm in the wood! We are the rot in the root! We are the germ in the blood! We are the thorn in the foot!" When we note that *The Song of a Mad Minstrel* was sold to *Weird Tales* in March 1930, the same month Howard sold Wright *The Dark Man* and *Kings of the Night*, we might be excused for thinking it more than coincidence. Add to this the fact that in Kipling's tale of Parnesius, he has him making tentative alliances with Picts and Norsemen who are threatening the Wall, to try to hold them from attacking until Maximus is able to triumph in Gaul and return the legions he has taken with him, seeming to echo the plot line outlined in Howard's Bran synopsis, and the case seems even stronger. However, Kipling's Picts (which he, like Machen, refers to as "Little People") are far from being Howard's ("Picts seldom fight," Parnesius says. "I never saw a fighting Pict for half a year. The tame Picts told us they had all gone North."), and none of the particulars of Howard's tales seem to suggest a linkage with Kipling's.

During the summer of 1930, Howard began a correspondence with the great weird fictionist H.P. Lovecraft. Among the earliest exchanges was a discussion which directly bears upon Howard's treatment of the Picts. Lovecraft, saying that he believed it probable that if there were any human inhabitants of the British Isles before the coming of the Mediterraneans, they were not cavemen or savages, but possibly "some of the squat Mongoloids now represented by the Lapps," wrote:

"It's true that the Celts share most vigorously the myth-cycle of *fairies, gnomes, & little people*, which anthropologists find all over Western Europe... & attribute to vague memories of contact with the Mongoloids.... Since these fair Nordic Celts found a smaller, darker race in Britain & Ireland, there is a tendency on the part of some to be misled, & to assume that the 'little people' legends allude to contact with *those* dark aborigines. This, however, can be clearly disproved by analysis of the myths; for such myths invariably share with the parallel Continental myths the specific features (or tracks of these features) of having the 'little people' essentially *repulsive & monstrous*, subterraneous in their habits of dwelling, & given to a queer kind of hissing discourse. Now this kind of thing does not apply to Mediterraneans - who are not abnormal or repulsive from the Nordic standpoint (being very similar in features), who did not live underground, & whose language... could scarcely have suggested hissing."

Howard replied:

"Your observations regarding the Mongoloid aborigines and their relation to the fairy-tales of western Europe especially interested me. I had supposed, without inquiring very deeply into the matter, that these legends were based on contact with the earlier Mediterraneans, and indeed, wrote a story on that assumption which appeared some years ago in Weird Tales - 'The Lost Race.' I readily see the truth of your remarks, that a Mongoloid race must have been responsible for the myths of the Little People, and sincerely thank you for the information."

Howard almost immediately put this new "knowledge" to use, in *The Children of the Night*, which he sold to *Weird Tales* in October 1930, less than two months after the above exchange. In the opening scene of this story,

several scholars are having a bull session in the library of a man named Conrad. The discussion turns to the *Nameless Cults* of Von Junzt, and the author's contention that the "Bran cult" is still active.

"'But when Von Junzt speaks of Picts, he refers specifically to the small, dark, garlic-eating peoples of Mediterranean blood who brought the Neolithic culture into Britain. The first settlers of that country, in fact, who gave rise to the tales of earth spirits and goblins.'

"'I can not agree to that last statement,' said Conrad. 'These legends ascribe a deformity and inhumanness of appearances to the characters. There was nothing about the Picts to excite such horror and repulsion in the Aryan peoples. I believe that the Mediterraneans were preceded by a Mongoloid type, very low in the scale of development, whence these tales-'

"'Quite true,' broke in Kirowan, 'but I hardly think they preceded the Picts, as you call them, into Britain. We find troll and dwarf legends all over the Continent, and I am inclined to think that both the Mediterranean and Aryan peoples brought these tales with them from the Continent. They must have been of extremely inhuman aspect, these Mongoloids.'"

From this point on, Howard's degenerated race of underground dwellers are no longer identified with the Picts, as they had been in *The Little People*. In fact, in *Children of the Night*, when the narrator, O'Donnel, is recalling a past life as Aryara, he says of the abhorrent race his people called "the Children of the Night," "They had once overrun and possessed this land, and they had been driven into hiding and obscurity by the dark, fierce little Picts with whom we contested now, and who hated and loathed them as savagely as did we."

In *People of the Dark*, written in 1931, Howard makes clear that *The Little People* and *Children of the Night* are the same. In this story, too, we learn of an object they worship:

"In the center of the chamber stood a grim, black altar.... Towering behind it on a pedestal of human skulls, lay a cryptic black object, carven with mysterious hieroglyphics. The Black Stone! The ancient, ancient Stone before

which, the Britons said, the Children of the Night bowed in gruesome worship, and whose origin was lost in the black mists of a hideously distant past. Once, legend said, it had stood in that grim circle of monoliths called Stonehenge, before its votaries had been driven like chaff before the bows of the Picts."

The People of the Dark was returned to Howard by *Strange Tales* in September 1931, with a request for revisions. It was probably between that date and February 1932 that he wrote the story in which all these elements at last came together, a story that is generally regarded by most Howard fans as one of his very best, *Worms of the Earth*.

H.P. Lovecraft, memorializing his friend, said, "It is hard to describe precisely what made Mr. Howard's stories stand out so sharply; but the real secret is that he himself is in every one of them...." The best of Howard's tales are centered squarely on the viewpoint character. This is why *Worms of the Earth* is by far the best of the Bran Mak Morn stories: it is the only one in which Bran is not seen through the eyes of another character. Howard himself recognized this, writing to Lovecraft shortly after this story was accepted:

"My interest in the Picts was always mixed with a bit of fantasy – that is, I never felt the realistic placement with them that I did with the Irish and Highland Scotch. Not that it was the less vivid; but when I came to write of them, it was still through alien eyes - thus in my first Bran Mak Morn story – which was rightfully rejected – I told the story through the person of a Gothic mercenary in the Roman army; in a long narrative rhyme which I never completed, and in which I first put Bran on paper, I told it through a Roman centurion on the Wall; in 'The Lost Race' the central figure was a Briton; and in 'Kings of the Night' it was a Gaelic prince. Only in my last Bran story, 'The Worms of the Earth' which Mr. Wright accepted, did I look through Pictish eyes, and speak with a Pictish tongue!"

This would also prove to be the last Bran Mak Morn story Howard would write. In the same letter (dated March 10, 1932) in which *Weird Tales* editor Wright told Howard, "I want to schedule WORMS OF THE EARTH soon, for that is an unusually fine story, I think," he had returned two other stories, asking for revisions to one: these were *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* and *The Phoenix on the Sword*, the first tales of a Cimmerian adventurer named Conan who would dominate Howard's fiction for the next three years. The Picts

were, of course, present in Conan's prehistoric "Hyborian Age": they were the hereditary enemies of the Cimmerians, who were themselves descendants of the pre-Cataclysmic Atlanteans of Kull. The Pictish wilderness stretched from the western borders of Aquilonia to the sea, and it is on that border that one of Howard's finest Conan tales, *Beyond the Black River*, is set. Pictish characters also play supporting roles in two of the James Allison stories, *Marchers of Valhalla* and *The Valley of the Worm*. But Bran, having made his foul bargain with the Worms of the Earth, is never heard from again.

It is tempting to see in Bran Mak Morn an autobiographical representation of Robert E. Howard. More so than any other of his characters, Bran feels the heavy weight of personal responsibility for his people, much as one suspects Howard must have felt toward his aging parents, especially his sickly mother. Bran knows that he is the last of his line, as perhaps Howard, an only child, may have felt he was the last of his. And Howard seems to explicitly suggest this connection when he insists upon his undying fascination with the Picts, and says "had I grown into the sort of a man, which in childhood I wished to become, I would have been short, stocky, with thick, gnarled limbs, beady black eyes, a low retreating forehead, heavy jaw, and straight, course black hair – my conception of a typical Pict." Of course, Howard is at some pains to show us that Bran Mak Morn differs from the "typical Pict," though sharing the characteristics of being small and dark-complected, with dark hair and eyes. This was not, as Howard says, his own type ("I was blond and rather above medium size than below"), making it all the more noteworthy that so many of his earliest characters share these features. Howard explicitly states, for instance, that Bran "physically...bore a striking resemblance to El Borak," the first character he created, some two years before Bran. His alter-ego in the fictionalized autobiographical novel, *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, is described as a "black Celt," "spare and gaunt," a "dark youth." And he related to H.P. Lovecraft a dream he had had as a child, in which the characters match this description:

"I dreamed that I slept and awoke, and when I awoke a boy and a girl about my age were playing near me. They were small and trimly shaped, with very dark skin and dark eyes. Their garments were scanty, and strange to me, now that I remember them, but at the time they were not strange, for I too was clad like them, and I too was small, and delicately fashioned and dark ... Now, as I woke in my dream, this scene was fully familiar to me, and I knew that the boy and the girl were my brother and sister; it was not as if I had merely wakened from a sleep, returning to my natural, work-a-day world. And

suddenly in my dream, I began to laugh and to narrate to my brother and my sister the strange dream I had had. And I told them of what – if there was any truth at all in reality – constituted my actual waking life... I told them that my dream had seemed so vivid while dreaming it, that I had actually thought it to be real, and believed myself to be a stocky blond child living a waking life, without knowledge of any other....” (Howard to H.P. Lovecraft, ca. December 1930, in *Robert E. Howard: Selected Letters 1923–1930*, p. 77).

Many of Howard’s Pictish characters share another interesting feature: they have names that share either a b/r or g/r consonant pattern. All the chieftains of the Picts have the b/r pattern: Bran, Brule (in the Kull stories), Berula (*The Lost Race*), Dulborn (*The Ballad of King Geraint*), Brogar (*The Dark Man* and *Tigers of the Sea*), and Brulla (*The Night of the Wolf*), while more “primitive” Picts generally have names with a g/r pattern, such as Grom, Gonar, Grok, and Grulk, or names that fit neither pattern. However, the b/r pattern is not reserved to Picts alone: such characters as El Borak, Turlogh O’Brien, Iron Mike Brennon, and Steve Bender also fit the b/r pattern and are short, dark-featured, or both. All, like the Picts, are from early in Howard’s writing career. El Borak, as we have said, actually predates Bran.

What this suggests is that the b/r naming pattern, and even more so the seeming identification with small, dark-featured characters, may have had roots in strong and lasting unconscious patterns, and that Howard’s admiration for the Picts, leading him to adopt them “as a medium of connection with ancient times,” may have stemmed from something prior to his discovery of the Pictish race and creation of Bran, possibly predating even El Borak. But while he created many characters who shared these features, he rarely adopted them as his *viewpoint* characters (even the earliest El Borak stories are generally told through his associates), until he was able to ally his strong emotional connection and storytelling skills in *Worms of the Earth*, following which he wrote no further tales of Bran.

Interestingly, then, after *Worms of the Earth* no Pictish character fits the b/r pattern: we have Teyanoga (*Wolves Beyond the Border*; in the first draft his name was “Garogh”) and Zogar Sag (*Beyond the Black River*) in the Conan series, and in these stories (and *The Black Stranger*) the Picts are primarily howling savages; and in the James Allison tales we find a Kelka (*Marchers of Valhalla*) and Grom (*The Valley of the Worm*), both blood brothers to the AEsir heroes, during an era when the Picts seem to be jungle-dwellers. Even the great chieftain of “The Hyborian Age,” who, five hundred years after

Conan, leads the Picts in overthrowing the Hyborian kingdoms and establishing an empire, while dark-skinned, dark-haired, and dark-eyed, is named "Gorm." In other words, *Worms of the Earth* seems to be the last story in which Howard felt a really personal connection with the Picts, the first and last time he would "look through Pictish eyes, and speak with a Pictish tongue!"

Notes on the Original Howard Texts

The texts for this edition of *Bran Mak Morn: The Last King* were prepared by Rusty Burke and David Gentzel, with the assistance of Glenn Lord. The stories have been checked either against Howard's original manuscripts and typescripts, copies of which were provided by Lord, or the first published appearance if a manuscript or typescript was unavailable. Every effort has been made to present the work of Robert E. Howard as faithfully as possible.

Deviations from the original sources are detailed in these textual notes. In the following notes, page, line and word numbers are given as follows: 11.20.2, indicating page 11, twentieth line, second word. Story titles, chapter numbers and titles, and breaks before and after chapter headings, titles, and illustrations are not counted; in poems, only text lines are counted. The page/line number will be followed by the reading in the original source, or a statement indicating the type of change made. Punctuation changes are indicated by giving the immediately preceding word followed by the original punctuation.

We have standardized chapter numbering and titling: Howard's own practices varied, as did those of the publications in which these stories appeared. We have not noted those changes here.

Men of the Shadows

Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. In the typescript, the poem that opens the story is not divided into stanzas. 3.15.3: no apostrophe after 'ages'; 3.18.6: no apostrophe after 'eons'; 4.14.5: no comma after 'helmets'; 5.1.6: thrusts, ; 5.11.9: dissappeared; 5.16.9: men, ; 6.5.9:

breat-plate; 6.7.8: up slashing; 6.18.5: in the typescript, it appears that several words have been erased between ‘and’ and ‘the’, with a comma following the erased words; 6.25.13: together, ; 6.35.6: least, ; 6.36.8: hilt, ; 7.5.3: sky towering; 7.10.4: weilded; 7.35.2: lieing; 8.6.10: semicolon after ‘land’; 8.34.8: acoutrements; 8.35.8: exhultation; 8.35.9: period after ‘thrilled’; 11.11.9: past; 11.19.2: them, ; 11.20.11: war-fare; 12.3.3: posses; 12.10.7: war-locks; 12.18.1: Twas; 12.18.8: war-fare; 12.25.3: appears to be ‘timw’ with ‘jj’ typed over the ‘m’; 12.34.5: no comma after ‘shoulder’; 13.9.14: no comma after ‘savagely’; 13.21.1: no comma after ‘shoulders’; 13.23.7: breat; 13.23.12: some one; 13.24.12: chief, ; 13.31.11: features,; 13.32.1: Picts, ; 13.35.4: you. ; 13.35.10: mazed, ; 14.8.4: no comma after ‘Then’; 14.8.5: spen (typed to right edge of paper); 15.4.7: spirit; 15.12.2: frought; 15.12.5: no apostrophe after ‘ages’; 15.13.1: no apostrophe after ‘ages’; 15.22.1: Romans. ; 15.22.3: he, ; 15.27.1: proudly, ; 15.33.4: fools. ; 15.33.6: he, ; 16.7.6: was.; 16.7.8: replied, ; 16.10.10: curiously, ; 16.12.6: his; 16.13.2: glitter, ; 16.14.8: wasteplaces; 16.21.1: chiefs (the word appears to have been originally misspelled and overstruck); 16.25.3: Norseman. ; 16.25.5: said, ; 16.27.3: no punctuation after ‘him’; 16.30.1: horrizon; 16.36.8: tatooed; 16.38.1: snakes; 16.38.4: sparce; 17.4.8: wind. ; 17.5.6: voice, ; 17.7.5: wizard. ; 17.9.7: chief. ; 17.9.10: answered, ; 18.1.6: harsh, ; 18.4.2: ‘the valley’ was inserted between ‘darkness of’ and ‘abysmal,’ the ‘of’ after ‘valley’ not in ts.; 18.6.8: no comma after ‘alit’; 18.8.6: savage. ; 18.8.11: whisper, ; 18.15.3: Picts. ; 18.16.1: tone, ; 19.2.5: chiefs; 19.4.2: disaproving (originally ‘disaapoving’, ‘p’ typed over second ‘a’, ‘r’ typed over ‘p’); 19.8.12: mid-night; 19.15.10: dust; 19.20.7: wizards; 19.23.7: phrase; 19.23.12: war-fare; 19.36.3: gasped, ; 20.1.13: it, ; 20.4.7: swift. ; 20.4.10: wizard, ; 20.19.4: oceans; 20.35.3: councils; 21.8.2: no apostrophe after ‘Sea-snakes’; 21.9.5: sea-gulls; 21.10.1: in beginning a new page, ts. has quotation mark before ‘Now’; 21.18.4: up ward; 21.29.3: more, ; 21.29.9: no comma after ‘it)’; 21.37.9: wizards; 22.13.3: no comma after ‘alit’; 22.19.9: them. ; 22.22.8: discourse, ; 22.33.11: Atlantic, ; 23.3.9: the asterisk for the footnote is not at this point in the typescript, but after ‘sunny sea’ at 23.29.13; 23.8.6: sky-ward; 23.13.10: devide; 23.20.4: no punctuation after ‘savage’; 23.29.13: asterisk for footnote is at this point in ts.; 23.30.10: thousans; 23 footnote: Note-Sea of Silent Waters-the Pacific Ocean; 24.1.6: ‘the’ not in ts.; 24.8.2: horrizons; 24.10.7: skillfull; 24.16.10: new formed; 24.30.2: the asterisk for the footnote is not at this point in the ts., but at 25.16.2; 24 footnote: Note-Neandertals; 25.5.5: it; 25.11.1: no period in ts. (typed to right edge of paper); 25.15.10: war-fare; 25.16.2: asterisk for footnote is at this point in ts.; 25 footnote: Note-Cro-Magnons; 26.18.9: Alpan; 26.22.9: sword; 26.37.10: war-fare; 27.7.2: wizards; 27.26.2: “Circle (‘The’ typed above); 27.26.4: beginning. ; 27.26.7: wizard, ; 28.2.1: semicolon after ‘show’; 28.5.5: One;

28.20.3: ints; 28.23.7: no period after ‘degenerate’ (typed to right edge of paper); 29.1.4: holacaust; 29.3.5: wizards; 29.3.7: exhultant; 29.4.3: silence, ; 29.5.6: Appian; 29.10.1: war-fare; 29.15.1: no quotation mark; 29.18.3: nations; 29.28.4: no quotation mark; 29.35.1: ts. is torn, the ‘r’ in ‘For’ is missing; 30.3.8: intself

Kings of the Night

Originally appeared in *Weird Tales*, November 1930. 33.1.2: Cæsar; 33.5.1: dash before ‘The’; 38.4.6: Cæsar; 38.25.6: Cæsar; 38.29.5: Cæsar; 39.23.3: Cæsar; 40.11.7: stedfast; 45.32.1: – Poe. ; 46.9.12: ‘will-power’ hyphenated at line break; 46.11.1: ‘lion-like’ hyphenated at line break; 57.7.1: – Chesterton. ; 60.15.3: ‘half-way’ hyphenated at line break; 64.10.11-64.11.1: way possible; 66.38.5: ‘side-long’ hyphenated at line break

A Song of the Race

The original typescript could not be located in time for this publication. The text is taken from the first appearance, in *Bran Mak Morn* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969). Glenn Lord recalls that in the original, the poem was not broken into quatrains. 80.8.9: quotation mark after ‘flame’; 80.20.7: quotation mark after ‘rune’; 80.24.9: quotation mark after ‘rhyme’; 80.28.8: quotation mark after ‘blow’’

Worms of the Earth

Originally appeared in *Weird Tales*, November 1932. In a letter to H.P. Lovecraft, circa December 1932, Howard noted several errors in the magazine appearance: “Concerning ‘Worms of the Earth’ – I must have been unusually careless when I wrote that, considering the errors – such as ‘her’ for ‘his’, ‘him’ for ‘himself’, ‘loathsome’ for ‘loathing’, etc.. I’m at a loss to say why I spelled Eboracum as Ebbracum. I must investigate the matter. I know I saw it spelled that way, somewhere; it’s not likely I would make such a mistake entirely of my own volition, though I do frequently make errors. Somehow, in my mind, I have a vague idea that it’s connected some way with the Gaelic ‘Ebroch’ – York.” 85.8.10: Ebbracum; 89.29.8: him; 90.14.6: Ebbracum; 95.25.8: Ebbracum; 95.28.1: Ebbracum; 97.25.11: Ebbracum; 101.25.2: Ebbracum; 101.33.1: Ebbracum; 104.20.3: laugh; 104.29.9: her; 104.30.5: loathsome; 105.7.1: there is a dash rather than a hyphen in ‘night-

things’; 111.2.5: cast, ; 115.29.4: Ebbracum; 124.2.11: Ebbracum’s; 124.6.8: *Cæsar*

The Dark Man

Originally appeared in *Weird Tales*, December 1931. 131.5.1: dash before ‘Chesterton’; 131 footnote: period after ‘AUTHOR’; 135.33.5: ‘wrist-strap’ hyphenated at line break; 137.18.1: ‘wolf-skin’ hyphenated at line break; 140.5.7: muttered, ; 140.32.4: ‘beast-like’ hyphenated at line break; 156.8.6: drunken

The Lost Race

Originally appeared in *Weird Tales*, January 1927. 169.30.8: Belgæ.

Poem

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. The poem was previously published with the title, “The Drums of Pictdom.”

The Little People

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. The story was originally untitled. A facsimile reproduction of the typescript is included in this edition. It is unusual in having holographic additions and corrections, in addition to Howard’s more frequent practice of typing such insertions. Because Howard’s handwriting can be exceptionally difficult, some of the readings are conjectural, as is the placement of some inserted material. 199.3.3: she, ; 199.8.6: This; 199.10.6: answered, ; 199.12.6-9: ‘as an exponent’ is hand-written above the original ‘to expound’, ‘of’ not in manuscript; 199.14.3: fetched. ; 199.14.8: ‘finallity’ hand-written above original ‘positiveness’; 199.14.10: seventeen, ; 199.17.7: fact. ; 199.17.9: said, ; 199.19.1: exclaimed, ; 199.20.9: nettled, ; 199.21.10: were; 199.23.7: ‘brotherly’ hand-written above ‘frown’; 199.30.5-10: ‘A race of small, dark people.’ hand-written above ‘Traces of their type may be’ with no indication

of intended insertion point; 199.31.1: Traces; 199.33.3: ‘Lapps’ hand-written next to typed ‘Laps’; 200.5.3: ‘by’ not in manuscript; 200.16.6: ago. ; 200.16.11: interest, ; 200.18.11: havent; 200.21.7: original had ‘dolmens’, crossed out in pencil, ‘menhirs’ written above; 200.24.1: Maybe. ; 200.25.1: ‘villager’ hand-written above original ‘fellow’; 200.25.3-4: ‘the warning’ hand-written in margin after ‘said’, no dash; 200.26.4: Youre; 200.26.6: no comma after ‘sophisticated’; 200.27.1: wouldnt; 200.29.11-30.1: ‘and combat’ hand-written after ‘interest.’; 200.31.5: exclaimed, ; 200.32.9: didnt; 200.35.3: wont; 200.35.4: either. ; 200.35.6: vetoed, ; 200.36.12-37.1: original had ‘true’, crossed out in pencil, ‘up to date’ hand-written above; 200.37.5-6: original had ‘New Age’, crossed out in pencil, ‘Younger Generation’ hand-written above; 200.38.2: havent; 200.38.10: night. ; 201.1.1: answered, ; 201.2.8: wouldnt; 201.3.11: you. ; 201.3.12-15: ‘to be out unprotected.”’ handwritten following ‘you.”’; 201.5.1: No quotation mark before ‘I’; 201.5.3: youre; 201.5.5: foolish. ; 201.7.14: no comma after ‘I’; 201.11.10: framing, ; 201.16.4: wouldnt; 201.20.9: willfull; 201.22.2: cant; 201.22.5: around. ; 201.22.7: flamed, ; 201.23.2: original had ‘restrain’, ‘bully’ hand-written above; 201.24.3: necessary. ; 201.24.5: sighed, ; 201.28.3: didnt; 201.28.8: anyhow. ; 201.31.9: original had ‘bully’, crossed out and ‘cajole’ hand-written above; 201.35.4: no period after ‘corridor’; 201.38.11: gristly; 202.1.10-2.1: ‘and the air was warm’ is typed in above ‘yet the whole landscape’ without indication of the intended insertion point; 202.2.6: LOOKED; 202.3.1-6: original had ‘Across the I rise,’ ‘fen’ and ‘saw’ are hand-written above; 202.4.4: original had ‘ruined Cromlech’, ‘ed’ of ‘ruined’ crossed out, ‘s’ inserted after ‘ruin’, and ‘Cromlech’ crossed out; 202.10.3-6: original had ‘She disliked compulsory obeidience extremely.’, ‘Compulsory obeidence was repugnant’ hand-written above; 202.12.13: ‘I’ hand-written above ‘lay’; 202.13.6-7: ‘brooding and’ typed in above ‘staring at the’ with no indication of intended insertion point; 202.18.10: original had ‘lurking’, crossed out and ‘impending’ hand-written above; 202.19.12: conciousness; 202.21.3: ‘through’ is typed above ‘into the window’; 202.22.12: arrouse; 202.24.11-25.1: originally ‘strange thoughts’, ‘strange’ is crossed out in pencil, ‘partly formed’ typed above ‘thoughts’, then ‘formed’ is crossed out and a word that may be ‘remembered’ is written above, but the reading is conjectural; 202.25.8: awke; 202.36.9: original had ‘cromlech’, crossed out and ‘ruins’ hand-written above; 202.37.1: no comma after ‘moon’; 202.37.9: comma rather than dash after ‘length’; 203.2.4: original had ‘in’, ‘within’ hand-written above; 203.3.8: original had ‘hastened’, ‘quickened’ typed above; 203.5.11: eveil; 203.7.1: no comma after ‘Then’; 203.8.6-10: original had ‘limned the scene clearly’, crossed out and ‘flung a veil of illusion’ hand-written above; 203.14.10: SAW; 203.16.9-10: original read ‘I saw that on three sides she was surrounded - they...’, ‘on’ through ‘surrounded’ is crossed

out in pencil; 203.17.3: After ‘me.’, the following sentence originally began ‘Only on the side next the ruins was the way clear and suddenly’, everything through ‘and’ is crossed out; 203.17.5-7: ‘instinctively’ is hand-written above ‘she’, extending into right margin, ‘I believe’ is hand-written below it in margin, no indication of intended insertion point; 203.21.1: no comma after ‘youth’; 203.24.9-25.4: ‘I did not fear I only wished to close with them’ hand-written above ‘I recognized these - I knew them of old and all’, no indication of intended insertion point; 203.27.1-29.6: ‘Hate leaped in me as in the old days’ is hand-written after ‘soul.’, appears to continue on next line with ‘when when men of my blood came from the North’ (the ‘N’ in ‘North’ may or may not be capitalized), slopes up slightly, followed by ‘Ay though the whole spawn of Hell rise up from those caverns which honey comb the moors’, but the insertion and some of the readings are conjectural; 203.33.2: features. ; 203.33.3-34.1: ‘the shimmer of flint daggers in their crooked hands’ is typed above ‘square faces with their unhuman features. Then with a’, no indication of intended insertion point; 203.34.10: them, ; 203.36.4: They; 203.38.6-204.1.2: ‘a flint dagger sank hilt deep in my thigh’ is typed above ‘darkened the moon-silvered stones. Then the ghastly’, no indication of intended insertion point; 204.2.7: semicolon rather than comma after ‘mine’; 204.4.1: original had ‘Mindless’, crossed out and ‘Heedless’ hand-written above; 204.4.12: ‘anew’ hand-written above semicolon; 204.6.3: ‘blindly’ is hand-written above ‘seeking’, no indication of intended insertion point; 204.6.5-8.1: ‘there the protection some vague instinct in obedience to some dim instinct just as women of her blood had done in by gone ages’ is hand-written after ‘seeking’ in the bottom margin of the page, ‘the’ and ‘some vague instinct’ are crossed out in pencil, some of the readings are conjectural; 204.8.1: at top of new page, ‘there the protection, following some instinct.’ appears to continue sentence from ‘seeking’ at bottom of previous page, before hand-written material was inserted; 204.12.2: dreams; 204.17.9: They; 204.18.14: original had ‘eonic’, ‘ancient’ hand-written above, obscured, reading conjectural; 204.25.8: semicolon rather than dash after ‘explain’; 204.28.1-30.12: ‘Aye, such a shriek as could echo down the dusty corridors of lost ages and bring’ hand-written above the line beginning ‘but I think that...’, ‘back from the whispering abyss of Eternity the ghost of the only one who could save’ hand-written above the line beginning ‘Time to the Beings...’, ‘a girl of Celtic blood’ hand-written above line beginning with new paragraph, ‘The foremost...’; 204.33.2: original had ‘appeared’, crossed out, ‘stood’ typed above; 204.33.7: original had ‘appearing’, ‘materializing’ hand-written above; 204.36.2-37.3: ‘A druid, answering once more the desperate need of people’ hand-written above ‘His brow was high and noble, his eyes mystic and’, ‘of his race’ hand-written above beginning of next line, ‘far-seeing’, no indication of intended insertion point; 205.2.6: no comma after ‘suddenly’;

205.4.6-5.9: ‘sword and shield against the’ hand-written above ‘who raised his hand above’, ‘powers of darkness, protecting helpless tribes as in the world’s youth’ hand-written above the line beginning ‘us as if in benediction...’, no indication of intended insertion point, some readings conjectural

The Children of the Night

Originally appeared in *Weird Tales*, April-May 1931. 222.28: a line of asterisks marks the section break; 222.38.7: ‘deer-skin’ hyphenated at line break; 227.20: a line of asterisks marks the section break; 231.1.8: mediæval

Bran Mak Morn

Text taken from Howard’s original holograph manuscript, provided by Glenn Lord. A facsimile reproduction is included in this edition. No changes have been made for this edition. However, some readings are conjectural.

Synopsis

The original typescript could not be located in time for this edition. The text is taken from the first publication, in *Cromlech: The Journal of Robert E. Howard Criticism*, No. 3 (Cryptic Publications, 1988). No changes have been made for this edition.

Worms of the Earth (draft version)

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Fragment

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Poem

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Robert E. Howard and the Picts: A Chronology

Excerpts from Howard's letters are taken from the originals, provided by Glenn Lord, and reproduced verbatim. "Untitled Essay, circa 1920-1923" is taken from Howard's original holograph manuscript, provided by Glenn Lord. Excerpt from *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* is taken from the edition published by Donald M. Grant (West Kingston, RI, 1990). Letter from Farnsworth Wright to Robert E. Howard, 16 March 1926, taken from original, provided by Glenn Lord. Excerpt from "The Night of the Wolf" taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. Excerpt from letter from H.P. Lovecraft to Robert E. Howard, 20 July 1930, text provided by David Schultz and S.T. Joshi. Selections from "The Hyborian Age" taken from original publication, in *The Hyborian Age* (Los Angeles: LANY Cooperative Publications, 1938). Excerpt from "Marchers of Valhalla" taken from first publication, in *Marchers of Valhalla* (West Kingston, RI: Donald M. Grant, 1972). Excerpt from "The Valley of the Worm" taken from original appearance in *Weird Tales*, February 1934. Excerpt from "A Biographical Sketch of Robert E. Howard" taken from *The Last Celt: A Bio-Bibliography of Robert E. Howard* (West Kingston, RI: Donald M. Grant, 1976).

Thanks Geof Darrow, Mike Mignola and Al Williamson for your support and encouragment.

Gary Gianni

I would like to thank my patient friend and mentor, Glenn Lord, for his generous cooperation and assistance with the Robert E. Howard Library of Classics, and for nearly a half-century of championing the cause of Robert E. Howard; Marcelo Anciano and Paul and Michael Berrow, for believing in the writer from Cross Plains, developing the plan, and allowing me aboard; David Gentzel, for his hard work, dedication, and invaluable advice; and my wife, Shelly, for her love, patience, and understanding.

Rusty Burke

I would like to thank my wife Mandy, for her love and understanding of how much this project means to me, and my daughter Emma for not complaining when I'm not around at the weekends; Marcelo for helping me realise a twenty year old dream and Geoff West for being the unwitting catalyst.

Stuart Williams

A big thanks to my partners in Wandering Star, Michael and Paul Berrow; to Stuart for his typographic skills; to Jim Keegan who is always there to share his design talents and to my mother, Gillian Anciano, all, without whom these books would not be made.

Marcelo Anciano

THE FULLY ILLUSTRATED ROBERT E. HOWARD LIBRARY
from Del Rey Books

The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian

The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane

The Bloody Crown of Conan

Bran Mak Morn: The Last King

*The Conquering Sword of Conan**

*forthcoming

Praise for Robert E. Howard

“I adore these books. Howard had a gritty, vibrant style—broadsword writing that cut its way to the heart, with heroes who are truly larger than life. I heartily recommend them to anyone who loves fantasy.”

—David Gemmell
Author of *Legend* and *White Wolf*

“The voice of Robert E. Howard still resonates after decades with readers—equal parts ringing steel, thunderous horse hooves, and spattered blood. Far from being a stereotype, his creation of Conan is the high heroic adventurer. His raw muscle and sinews, boiling temper, and lusty laughs are the gauge by which all modern heroes must be measured.”

—Eric Nylund
Author of *Halo: The Fall of Reach* and *Signal to Noise*

“If you love heroic adventure and black-and-white heroism, this is the stuff.”

—*Amazing Stories*

“For stark, living fear . . . what other writer is even in the running with Robert E. Howard?”

—H. P. Lovecraft

“Howard . . . painted in the broadest strokes imaginable. A mass of glimmering black for the menace, an ice-blue cascade for the hero, between them a swath of crimson for battle, passion, blood.”

—Fritz Lieber

“Forget Schwarzenegger and the movies. This is pure pulp fiction from the 1930s, before political corrections and focus groups dictated the direction of our art. Swords spin, entrails spill, and women swoon.”

—*Men’s Health*

“Howard wrote pulp adventure stories of every kind, for every market he could find, but his real love was for supernatural adventure and he brought a

brash, tough element to the epic fantasy which did as much to change the course of the American school away from precious writing and static imagery as Hammett, Chandler, and the *Black Mask* pulp writers were to change the course of American detective fiction."

—MICHAEL MOORCOCK
Award-winning author of the Elric saga

"In this, I think, the art of Robert E. Howard was hard to surpass: vigor, speed, vividness. And always there is that furious, galloping narrative pace."

—POUL ANDERSON

"Howard honestly believed the basic truth of the stories he was telling. It's as if he'd said, 'This is how life really was lived in those former savage times!'"

—DAVID DRAKE
Author of *Grimmer Than Hell* and *Dogs of War*

"For headlong, nonstop adventure and for vivid, even florid, scenery, no one even comes close to Howard."

—HARRY TURTLEDOVE

Bran Mak Morn: The Last King is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A Del Rey® Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 2005 by Robert E. Howard Properties, LLC.
Series Editor: Rusty Burke

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright conventions. Published in the United States by Del Rey Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada

Limited, Toronto. Previously published in Great Britain by Wandering Star, Ltd., in 2001.

This edition published by arrangement with Wandering Star Ltd.

Del Rey is a registered trademark and the Del Rey colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

www.delreybooks.com

eISBN 0-345-48461-4

v1.0